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Standing Tall

Henryka Shaw

Standing Tall

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In memory of my beloved father

*For my children, their children, and
the generations to follow, I dedicate
this personal history of my survival.*

'We don't aim to fail, we fail to aim.'

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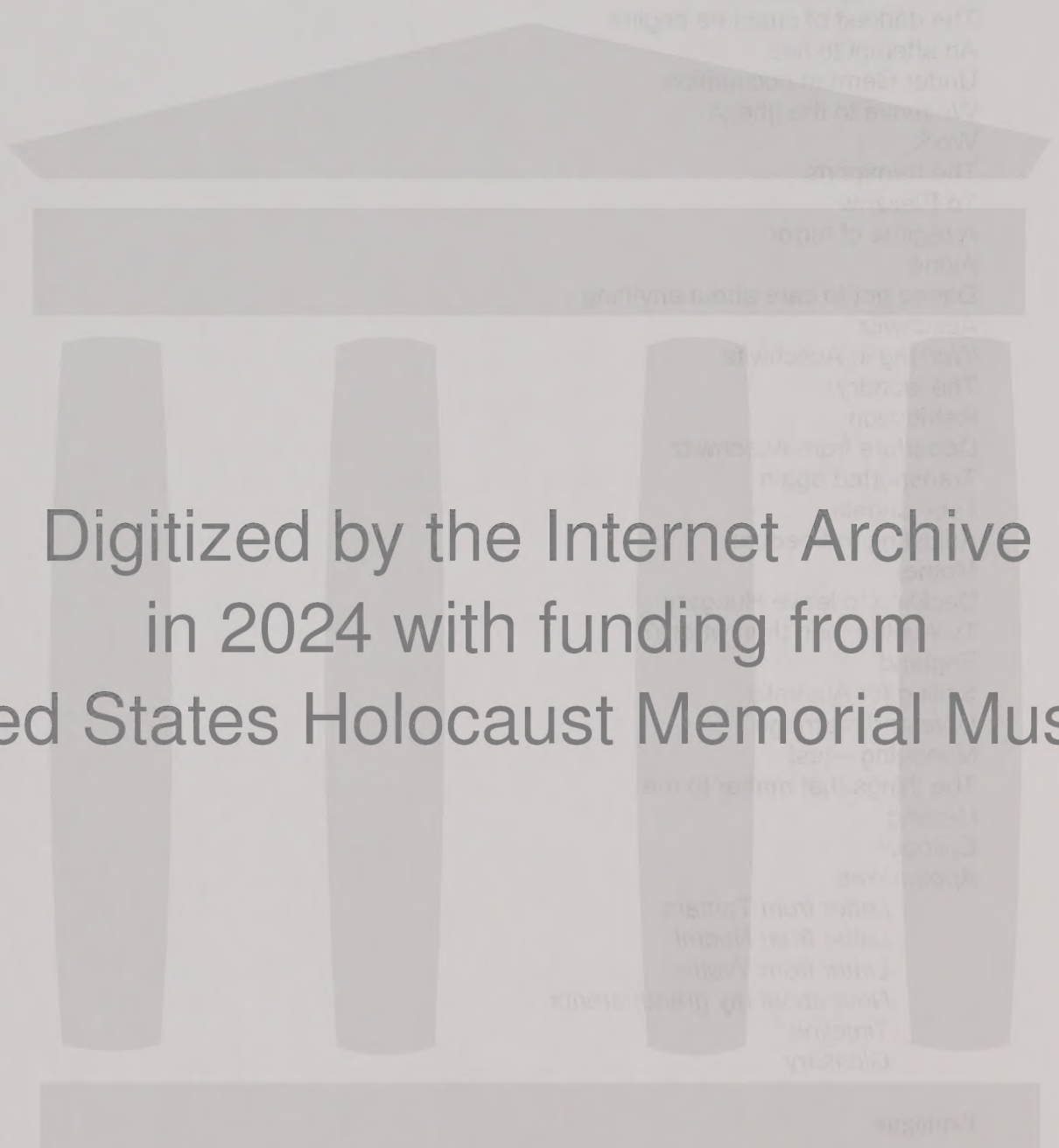
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Prologue

Once upon a time, in the ancient Polish city of Krakow, there was a young girl named Henryka Schermant. Let's call her Henia. She lived with her mother, Mina, father, Ignacy, sister, Franciszka, and brother, Szymon. She loved music, stories and games; she adored her family. Henia was her father's favourite – she was tall and spirited, just like him. When she saw her big sister kissing her boyfriend, she'd run to her father and tell him of her impropriety.

Franciszka did all the things teenagers loved to do. One day, while sharing a cigarette with some of her friends, she caught sight of her mischievous little sister. Quickly, she



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popped the cigarette into Henia's mouth. 'There,' she said. 'You've smoked. You tell on me, and I'll tell Father you were smoking.'

The next chapter in the story *should have been* that Franciszka finished university and married her sweetheart; that Szymek had a brilliant career, that Henia completed her education and had an interesting, fulfilling life in Europe. But none of that was to be.

I am Henia. As I write, I will soon turn 80. I am mostly happy with my life. Why 'mostly'? When I go to bed at night, I have trouble sleeping. It's because of the stories I have in my head. A lot of them, I am still unable to tell. World War II and the Holocaust – I lived through both. As for people who say the Holocaust never happened, I would like to meet them face-to-face. Maybe I'd show them the number tattooed on my forearm – A216538. Maybe, if they looked into my eyes, they would see the stain of the horror I experienced during those years, the horror I can never forget, day or night.

The Holocaust swept away European Jewry and, among them, most members of my family. Miraculously, my mother, my sister and I survived.

I want you, my family, to know about your forebears, to know what happened to us, and about those whom you lost.

But there is so much more to my life than the war years. After Liberation, I went to Budapest, where I believed I would find my sister. After I found her, I realised that Budapest held no future for me. I spent time in Austria, in a Displaced Persons Camp in the town of Enns, and later lived for a while in England where, for the first time in years, I experienced a measure of happiness. Eventually, I followed my mother out to Australia, where I met and married Rudy, the light of my life.

Together we had our beautiful family and built a good life. I had 17 years of happiness before Rudy passed away; then I raised our children on my own.

I am so proud of each of my daughters. They turned out just as I wished. They have all married and, between them, they have given me seven grandchildren.

Here I am, living in Sydney, so far from where I started out in life. I want my grandchildren – and hopefully their children, and those that come after – to know about their heritage. I want to share with them something of my experiences; some of them are so dark that I still cannot speak of them. It is important to me that I record the journey of my life so that when my time comes, not all will be gone. I shall try to be as accurate as I possibly can – if I make any errors of fact, it will most likely be because of my age; my memory is starting to let me down.

Childhood

I was born on 14 July 1925, the third and youngest child. My sister, Franciszka, who I called Niusia (born 2 November 1919), is six years older, and my brother, Szymon, whom we called Szymek (born 11 June 1921), was born four years before me. The three of us attended school for half-days, returning home for lunch at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Mother was always waiting for us when we got home from school.

Most of my childhood memories are of living at 1 Wielicka Street, in the suburb of Podgorze, just south of the Wisla (Vistula) River in Krakow. The family home had belonged to my father's parents and it had been passed down to my father and his three siblings, Emil, Marta and Toska, all of whom had been born in the house. Apart from Emil and his wife, Sala, and their three children, Zygmund, Szymon and Lilusia, the rest

of us all lived there – separately but under the same roof. It was a large building that comprised a number of apartments and commercial premises. The commercial areas were downstairs – a confectionery shop, which my Uncle Emil ran; and a pub, which my Aunt Marta ran.

Ours was a large garden. We always had dogs, one in particular called Vera, who had lots of puppies. I remember trying to play with the suckling pups, but Vera wouldn't have a bar of it. My last dog was called Pikus.

Another memory I have is of the severe Polish winters. We used to skate on the ice in the streets and go skiing on the Krzemionki hills and mountains, which were very close to our home.

Marta, who never married, shared an apartment with her mother. Toska and her husband, Max Hochstim, had two children, Szymon and Stefcia. All the siblings in my father's family with sons named one of them after their paternal grandfather, Szymon Schermant. I never knew my father's father. I had a vague idea that he lived apart from us all, somewhere in Germany, maybe in Frankfurt.

It was Toska we had the most to do with; she and Mother were close. I recall her going down every morning to buy eggs, milk and chicken. She always checked the food to make sure it was what we wanted. If the chicken had an egg in it, that was a bonus.

I used to play with Toska's son, Szymon, and her daughter, Stefcia, who was around my age. Between us, we two little girls shared a doll and a pram and we would play together happily for hours on the verandah. Before I started school, at the age of six, Stefcia died of diphtheria. Death was a taboo topic in those days; the mentality was to spare children from life's difficulties. No-one actually told me what had happened to Stefcia. I knew she'd been sick and had gone to a clinic. Noting the anguish and grief around me, I worked it out for myself.

As a young girl, I was timid and shy. Always tall, thin and not particularly good-looking – at least that's what I thought. Physically, I think I take after Dad's side of the family. I remember his mother, Salomea, the way she looked and her manner. She was tall, straight-backed and distinguished-looking. I can picture her standing on the verandah, fashionably dressed in a long black coat. She was always elegant and beautifully groomed, despite being well into her eighties. Grandmother died of a heart attack when I was about six.

Because Father was the eldest son, his entire family sometimes assembled in our apartment to celebrate Jewish festivals. I have memories of huge get-togethers for Pesach. A large group of my aunties, uncles and cousins would fill our house. We used to open up the adjoining rooms, and a long table would be extended through both rooms.

We were considered middle-class as my father, Ignacy (born in 1892), was educated, had his own business and owned our home. He was a technical engineer and had an office in the city at 97 Starowislna Street, importing machinery parts from Germany. Mother used to work with him at the office sometimes. Father often went to the Leipzig fair. Some of our kitchen furniture was purchased there, which was a great source of pride for Mother. Nevertheless, we weren't terribly well-off.

My mother, Mina *née* Pleisner had had an orthodox upbringing. She was born on 26 October 1896, the eldest daughter of Sara Blima and Joseph Pleisner, and grew up in a place called Siedleczka, a small village close to Kanczuga in Galicia, southern Poland.

She was one of nine children. Before the war her sister, Hela, went to America, where she married but had no children. My Auntie Mala spent the war years in the Galician city of L'vov. My mother's younger male siblings helped my grandparents on their small farm.

For as long back as I can remember, my sister and I always made the train journey to stay with Mother's parents for summer holidays. The closest train station to their town was Pszeworsk. We'd spend about two months there, over July and August. Father always sent me a card and a present for my birthday, which is on July 14th so it was always during the school holidays.

My parents were wonderful people. Without their influence, I doubt I could have survived the awful events that were to unfold. They had met during World War I, when they were both serving in the Austrian army. That came about through one of those 'accidents' of European history – my parents' native Galicia had been part of the Austrian Empire but after World War I it reverted to Poland. My father was an officer, and Mother was a nurse. She was decorated for her services. I have a photograph of her in her nurse's uniform wearing that medal. She was an exceptional human being – kind, gentle, sweet and beautiful.

Although we didn't have money to throw around, Mother liked her husband to look presentable when he was out and about on business. If ever she suggested to him that it was time for a new suit, he'd shrug and say, 'I don't need a suit. I've still got my suit.' Mother, determined, would arrange for a tailor to come to the house in the evening to take his measurements. And inevitably it would be a Jewish tailor and consequently someone of small stature. Mother would announce, 'Ignaz, I'm very busy in the kitchen. Let the man measure you up.' With an impish look in his eyes, my very tall Father would get up on a chair, which naturally would make the little tailor all flustered. And he'd look up at Father and ask him why he was up there. 'So you can measure my inside leg,' would come the reply. 'And you won't reach.' Father loved a joke. Nevertheless, thanks to Mother, he always looked elegant.

I have sweet memories of my early home life. Mother used to put me to bed at night. She had a nice, large bust. She'd come into my bedroom and lie down with me. I'd snuggle into her arm, against her breast. She'd fall asleep with me. Then after a while she'd get up to go back to the rest of the family. I'd say, 'Mamush, I'm not asleep yet. Please come back.'

My father was thoughtful, strong and dependable, and I adored him. He belonged to a small orchestra. I remember how he would listen to opera at night on the radio. My love of opera and music I trace to those memories. Father always made time to play with us. We'd play 'horsie' – he was the horse and we rode on his back. Another game was to make a band. Father had a trumpet and Szymon had a trombone, and for the rest we banged out the beat on chairs or saucepan lids, using wooden spoons. He often used to take me to a restaurant called Jutlzenka for frankfurts and sauerkraut. The restaurant is still there today, and the menu is unchanged.

We were not a strictly religious household, despite the fact that we observed Kashrut and all the festivals. We were assimilated into the Polish way of life and had Polish first names. The Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, the first Saturday of the month, Mother would prod Father to accompany her to *shule*. He'd go but would have his briefcase with him. Afterwards he would put his hat into the briefcase and slip off to the office. Mother would take us home and serve a proper Shabbat lunch which she'd have prepared the evening before.

The area in which we lived wasn't well-to-do; if anything it was rough. It was populated mostly by non-Jews. There were just a few Jewish families living in the vicinity. The Enoch family lived across the street from us. From their third-floor window, they could look across into our apartment and see what we were having for our *Shabbat* evening meals. My sister used to coach Kuba Enoch for his high school entry exams, and I took advantage of those times to swing on the baby swing they had. Today Kuba and his wife, Kitty, live in Sydney quite near me, and I count them and their children as my dearest friends. From my childhood I also remember the widow, Mrs Rotter, and her daughter, Camilla; I don't recall her son's name. The Blońskis had a grocery store next door to us. Then there were the Fogels, the Herzogs and the Siegels, who were all grocers, too. Most Jews tried to make a living in small businesses. It was against the law for Jews to own land.

Our home was close to the Podgorze railway station. Sometimes, as Jews were getting off the train, young Polish thugs would throw stones at them. On one occasion, Father caught some of them in the act. He knew the perpetrators by name and he gave them a good hiding. He was a strong person and, to me, totally fearless.

The construction of a tramline in our area was to have serious consequences for me and my family. One day, shortly before World War II started, dangerous-looking cracks appeared in our building. It was declared unsafe to live there, and we were informed that the building had to be pulled down. That very day, we were forced to leave – without any warning at all. It happened to be a Saturday. The fire brigade arrived, and that was the end of the matter. The rest of the details have been blocked out of my memory.

In 1989 I saw that a Christian monument had been erected on the site where our house had been pulled down – those sorts of monuments are dotted everywhere in Poland.
Krakow, Poland

Krakow is considered to be quite beautiful. Historically, it was the capital of Poland until the end of the sixteenth century, when Warsaw took over that function. Archaeological findings provide evidence that Wawel Hill, which overlooks the old part of the city, was settled as far back as the early Stone Age. The hill is crowned by the impressive Wawel Royal Palace, which stands in its glory to this day. Built shortly after 1000 AD, it is regarded as one of the most stately examples of European Renaissance architecture. This was the city in which I grew up.

I loved to go to town with my mother. But her favourite outing with me was a trip to the hospital to check that I didn't have tuberculosis! My parents were always concerned about my health. I was considered physically delicate. Afterwards, we would go to Remu'h, an extremely old synagogue, to which a cemetery was attached. It dated from the sixteenth century, and we used to pay a visit on important occasions, such as my sister's exams or a particular business deal. Mother would light a Yahrzeit candle there and make a prayer to God. The idea is that God sees the light and so hears the prayer and the wish, and grants it. We were sincere believers, particularly my mother.

According to legend, a couple were celebrating their wedding one Friday with some friends, and because they didn't stop the music and dancing before Sabbath came, the synagogue collapsed and all those present were killed.

Many famous, highly revered rabbis and elders were buried at the Remu'h cemetery, and you could see their tombstones still there.

Revisiting the past

I made a trip to Poland in 1989 – I would never have gone had it not been to visit my very dear, oldest friend, Zoska. One Shabbat, I went to the Remu'h synagogue and cemetery, to revisit those moments when I'd been there with my mother.

In the synagogue, I noticed someone there; he stood out because of his slightly different way of dressing. He looked as if he was a visiting Western Jew, like I was. I questioned the elder of the synagogue about him. The elder told me that the man was from America. I asked the elder if he wouldn't mind asking the visitor if his name was Max Hilfstein.

It was indeed Max! He had lived near us in Podgorze, Krakow; he used to have a hairdressing salon. Every day I used to pass that salon on my way to school. His blonde curly hair always drew my attention.

What an amazing coincidence that a past neighbour had been visiting Remu'h at the same time as me.

School

My early years at school were pleasant on the whole. I started my formal education at the age of six, as was the custom. My first school, Jadwiga Dambrowki – named after a queen of Poland – was small, and I liked my teachers. They liked me, too, and because of my height, they often asked me to look after the class if they were busy; this I enjoyed very much.

But being tall did have its disadvantages. Because I had to sit in the back row, so as not to obstruct the view of other pupils, I couldn't catch some of what was going on, which I quietly resented. On those occasions, I would pay little attention to the lesson.

Father cut an elegant figure. I can picture him at the school when parent-teacher interviews were being held. He would graciously kiss the hand of my teacher – as polite people did in those days. About 20 per cent of the students were Jewish, and I was always treated with courtesy. I stayed at that school until I was 12 years of age.

At my next school, Henryka Sienkiewicza – named after a Polish writer – I didn't find my classmates so friendly. My sister and brother attended a Jewish high school, called Hebrew Gymnasium, in the middle of the city. But because I was very susceptible to cold and had 'flu every winter, my parents thought the early-morning trip into the city would be tiring for me, so they sent me to the local school instead. That way I could stay in bed for longer in the mornings.

The school was predominantly non-Jewish. In the playground, Jewish children were ostracised, and the teachers largely turned a blind eye to such behaviour. If you took a bread roll to school, you had to hide it, otherwise it would cause jealousy. The local Polish children were mainly poor. Many of their mothers were employed in Jewish households, and there was a level of smouldering resentment that frequently boiled over.

I recall a particularly vivid incident from that school. In fact, it is carved into my memory. It took place very early in July 1939, not long before my birthday and just before school holidays.

History lesson

I am 13 years old, and I am filled with outrage. My History teacher, Miss Tomasik, has just stated, 'All Jews are bastards.' Suddenly I am on my feet and I stand to my full

height – I am tall like my father, proud like him! ‘That’s not true,’ I exclaim. ‘Non-Jews can also be awful people! It has nothing to do with religion!’

A heated discussion ensues. All the usual views are trotted out about Jews being rich and always having money and exploiting others, things like that. No, no, no! My blood is boiling. There is yelling and shouting. Before I know what I’ve done, the words have come spilling out of my mouth. I’ve repeated a common ditty, and in Polish it rhymes perfectly: ‘Whoever doesn’t care for Jews can kiss their b...!’

There is a brief stunned silence. Miss Tomasik, flabbergasted, orders me to gather up my belongings and go home. I am not to return to school without my parents.

Beyond doubt, I was spirited, but I’d never been outspoken in class like that before. It was awful having to face my parents and tell them what I had said and explain everything that had happened, but I had no choice. I think they understood what had provoked my outburst, but they were disappointed in me for using such language and extremely worried at the thought of my being expelled.

The three of us went together to see the headmistress, but I wasn’t allowed to say a word or to defend my position. Miss Tomasik wasn’t even there at that meeting. I was told I was no longer welcome in that school. And that turned out to be my last day of formal education.

The war was a matter of a few weeks away. By the time I set foot in that place again, it was 1989. The building was by then old and dilapidated and it was no longer used as a school. Not that I wasted any sentiment about that. Poland, the land of my birth, failed me and my family, my relations, my friends. Utterly.

Looking back, I can appreciate how limited my grasp of the situation was. The world outside the classroom was largely unknown to me. Ours was a liberal household. We were assimilated and taught to speak Polish well; we had a Polish maid whom we treated as one of the family. So this event ruptured my sense of an ordered universe. Many more such ruptures were about to occur through my life.

At that time, I was overwhelmed by an enormous sense of injustice. Later it struck me that there had been other Jewish girls in the classroom, but none of them had stood up to say anything. I had also expected the religious studies teacher to intervene and see to it that I wasn’t expelled. But he did not; he had his own job to think about.

I was deeply embarrassed about using this language, but not about speaking up. I still find it hurtful that I was denied my formal schooling. You can lose money, property, possessions, but no-one should ever strip a person of his or her education. For the rest of my life I felt the consequences of this loss. This awful incident took place during the prelude to war when anti-Semitism was riding high. The Poles relished the thought of Hitler ridding them of the Jews. Little did they imagine what fate awaited them, too, especially the Polish intelligentsia and members of the officer corps.

The lead-up to war

The general attitude of the time was to put up with anything. Some Jewish people kept quiet and didn’t try to defend themselves against anti-Semitic remarks or behaviour. There were innumerable incidents. Children used to chase Orthodox Jewish men up the street and try to yank their beards. I was used to seeing these men scurrying to the railway station, trying to pick their moment in order to avoid being harassed. And if stones were thrown, they just ran and hoped that none hit them.

I hadn't been brought up that way. My father was 6 foot 2 inches (almost 2 metres) tall, and I'd seen him stand up to hoodlums; he was my role model. My family deliberately ignored the anti-Semitism around us, unless it came close to home, like that incident in my class.

But there was also an eerie atmosphere around; I noticed it everywhere. My parents often spoke German at home if they didn't want us children to know what they were discussing. It felt as though all sorts of insidious things were happening.

The forces of history were about to overtake us, and we were helpless to resist. The world now knows that the decade leading up to September 1939 in Germany and across Europe was dominated by anti-Semitism. On 9 November 1938, Goebbels' *Kristallnacht* ('Crystal Night – the Night of Broken Glass') occurred when Nazi stormtroopers in civilian clothes burned down synagogues and broke into Jewish homes across Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland, terrorising families and beating and arresting more than 20,000 men, who were then taken into concentration camps.

At the outset of the war, Poland had Europe's largest Jewish community within its borders. Not only did almost all the Jewish Poles lose their lives during World War II, Poland sustained the highest losses of its citizens, on a percentage basis, of any country. The capital city, Warsaw, was practically destroyed, and material and cultural losses were incalculable.

The darkest of chapters begins

On 1 September 1939, the Germans began their onslaught of Poland, overcoming the Polish army within two weeks. On 3 September, Britain and France declared war on Germany, and on the 17th of that same month, the Soviet Union invaded Poland. The Soviets had made a deal with the Germans – the Molotov Ribbentrop Non-aggression Pact. Consequently, by October, Poland had been cut in two parts, both of which were occupied by cruel totalitarian states. The fate of those imprisoned on either side was to be bleak. The Nazis occupied western Poland, and two-thirds of the Jewish population were rounded up and placed in ghettos. Historians estimate that about half a million people died in the ghettos from starvation and disease.

Once the war began, everything seemed to move much faster than previously. On the day war broke out, the Germans dropped bombs very close to us. One landed on a train full of Polish soldiers as it was crossing the Zablocie Bridge, less than half a kilometre from our house. I saw the planes swooping down, the bombs falling. It was terrifying. Everywhere I looked I saw blood, people crying and so many dead bodies.

Because of Mother's nursing experience, she immediately swung into action. She grabbed sheets and used them to bandage people and to help in any way she could.

As bad as it was, we mentally adjusted to what was happening. What else could we do? More planes and bombs followed. It was so frightening. Our whole way of life was to change. Our reaction was very much one of resignation and tacit acceptance of what was happening. Everything was incomprehensible. It was hard to fight at that time against a force that was so powerful and pervasive throughout our world. Our naivety was such that we did not believe harm would come to us civilians.

Based on her personal experiences, Mother was sure that we would be safe. She explained to us that wars were run according to a set of rules. Sadly, her confidence was misplaced. The Germans never adhered to any rules.

An attempt to flee

A few days later, or perhaps it was the following day, my parents decided that we had to leave Krakow. The Germans were approaching in trucks and in tanks. Many people fled east towards the Russian border, but we aimed to reach my mother's parents, to the south. The plan was to wait there and see what might happen, hoping that food supplies would be better out of the city.

I watched and listened to everything I could to find out what was going on, but my parents didn't want us to know; they wanted to protect us from their worries. They didn't gather us together and tell us why we had to leave Krakow so quickly, or even that we were heading for my grandparents' village. I only remember the incidents as they unfolded.

Our family went together, travelling on foot. I carried a tiny suitcase full of all sorts of chocolate. My uncle sold chocolate and sweets so we always had a good supply. Sneaking sweets from his jars had been a childhood prank; he'd always find us out. Similarly, it took a short while for my parents to twig that I kept opening the bag to nibble at the chocolate inside.

Our journey dragged on, day after day. We walked most of the time, but occasionally my father begged a place for me on a horse-drawn wagon for an hour or two. There was such a massive exodus of people, progress was slow. Roads were jammed with cars, bicycles, people on foot. Every so often we had to run into the woods or a ditch to hide from the planes. In the evenings, we went into the forest and tried to sleep. Sometimes we'd see people walking around us with torches. We assumed that they were spying, observing people's movements.

The Germans were advancing rapidly. We learnt from other travellers, and sometimes from Polish soldiers, about their whereabouts. I realised afterwards that the Polish soldiers were running away, just as we were. They were poorly equipped. There was no point in them staying and fighting. They wouldn't have stood a chance.

Once again, no-one explained any of this to me. These were just my perceptions.

We made it to Dembica, not terribly far from Krakow. There we ate whatever food we could find, and I became dreadfully ill with cholera, one of many people to be infected. Our little Daschund dog, which was travelling with us – we couldn't bear to have left him behind – also caught the disease and died. He was a lovely little dog, and I was deeply saddened. His name was Pikus II. I had diarrhoea with blood in it. I remember my mother constantly wiping my whole body with methylated spirits to try to get rid of the infection. We had to return home.

My parents heard that the Germans had gone into Krakow but were not attacking civilians. People started to return to Krakow, and so did we, this time travelling by train.

My parents were both community-minded, and Mother was particularly active in the Jewish welfare society in Krakow. Consequently, we used to take orphans into our home. I remember some of their names – Berek Wisnia, Motek Weichsebaum, and a boy named Artus, who was with us on that train trip. Artus had just lost his father, and Mother looked after him both before and during the war, as much as she was able.

During the train trip, I recall a stranger asking my father – who didn't have a typically Jewish appearance – if he was a 'Jewish uncle' because one of the orphans with us was so Jewish-looking. Angered by this, my father gave the stranger a telling-off.

Under German occupation

Back in Krakow, the Germans were indeed occupying the city. We tried to reconstruct our lives, but so much was strange. Nobody returned to school. Still recovering from my illness, I never left the house for weeks.

We heard rumours that some Jewish men had been shot – Orthodox Jews who wore full beards and long black coats. Had they drawn too much attention to themselves because of their attire? Was that why it had happened? We refused to believe that anyone would come and do such a thing to us. There was such disbelief in my parents' minds about the possibility of assimilated Jews being harmed. We saw ourselves as Polish and Jewish – both intertwined.

Orders started coming thick and fast. We had to wear the Star of David armbands at all times to identify ourselves as Jews. One day, I took off my armband and went to the train station to buy milk. There I ran into someone in German uniform who was familiar to me. I struggled to recall who he was. Then it clicked. He was someone by the name of Elsner, the brother of a girl I knew from school. Prior to the war he'd been sent to Germany to avoid going to prison. Now here he was, in uniform, carrying a gun. He could not have been more than 19. He spotted me and must have recognised me; my height always made me conspicuous. He yelled at me, 'You there! Jew! Buying milk here! March!'

Although I was a few years younger than him, I was probably the same height. I grabbed him by the lapels and said in Polish, 'How dare you, calling out that I'm a Jew. How dare you!'

The milk fell to the ground, and he grabbed for his revolver. Terrified, I ran straight home, threading my way through the back streets. But he got to my house before me. Mother opened the door, and he shouted and swore at her, saying that we were Jews and we weren't to go to the station to buy food or daily produce. 'The Devil should take you!' he screamed.

Father calmed him down, and he soon went away. Both my mother and I were dreadfully shaken by the incident. From that time on, I was fearful about going into the street.

Yet I continued to remove my Star of David quite often and put it in my pocket so that I could keep going to the station. I was always a tomboy and a risk-taker.

We move to the ghetto

Suddenly, out of nowhere, came the announcement that we were being moved into the ghetto. It was at the end of 1940 or early 1941. The ghetto was in Podgorze, close to where our family home had been prior to its demolition. It was almost a relief to me. The words, 'I will not see Elsner,' danced through my mind. I felt I would be more secure in the ghetto, and that vindictive soldier wouldn't be able to get to me once we were in there.

Inside the ghetto, my family occupied a tiny room with a window. At one end of the room was a stove for cooking – when we could find food to cook.

Food quickly became a major preoccupation. We had ration cards, but they didn't supply enough. We were fortunate that part of the house where we lived in the ghetto had been converted into a restaurant. When curfew came and the restaurant was closed, we would go through the corridor on the inside of the house, into that restaurant, and eat any food that was unsold. That was at the beginning, when there was still some

semblance of normality. In the evenings, we had a pleasant enough time, telling stories and jokes.

Before long, the pure tedium of spending long unbroken periods inside the ghetto weighed heavily. Also in the ghetto was a dentist named Zigmund Demner. He was a good dentist and rather attractive, too. So, somewhat mysteriously, I frequently found myself with sore teeth. I loved to pop across the street to see him; anything to get out of the room.

As winter approached, German soldiers rounded up lots of people, including the members of our family, to clean snow off the streets in Krakow. Although we were not paid or given any food, we didn't complain. It felt good to be doing something and to get out of the ghetto.

The boredom of life in the ghetto remained difficult for me to bear. After a while, I started venturing out of the ghetto again, in spite of the danger. Polish policemen were stationed inside the ghetto gate; Germans patrolled outside it. Surrounding the ghetto was a high brick wall embedded with shards of glass and topped with barbed wire so that no-one could escape. A tram commuted through the ghetto and the Polish sector. To get out of the ghetto, I would show my identification card and slip the Polish policemen a few zlotys – Polish money. They didn't ever turn down the bribe. To return, I would be waiting for the moment the tram stopped while the gate was being opened. I would hop on board and get back into the ghetto that way. One particular conductor, a Polish man named Stefan Grabowski, whom we knew from before the war, was extremely kind. He would open the door or leave it ajar so he could push it up and I could get in at the exact moment when the German policemen were passing. I met Stefan after the war and thanked him.

I grew bolder. Over time, I devised a method of identifying myself to the Polish policeman who happened to be on duty. I used to give him some money. He took it and indicated with a wink to the German soldier on the other side of the gate to let me out of the ghetto. I even had the audacity to ask until what time he was on duty so I could easily get back into the ghetto. The extreme danger of this escaped me; I was too young to even consider it.

My main job was bringing in food. Outside the ghetto, I'd obtain potatoes, carrots – whatever I could get – trading with a little money or perhaps a ring or brooch. We didn't have much in the way of cash or jewellery or other things of value. My mother had sheets, pillowcases, towels, and they were good enough to exchange for some food.

Some people managed to bring oil and flour into the ghetto illegally, but it was terribly expensive.

At times, there would be a school for children inside the ghetto, and we attended. A young lady named Stefa Kempner taught us a little bit of maths, sewing, painting and Hebrew. She created a warm, congenial atmosphere in her house. I felt secure there. But it didn't last long; so many children were transported out of the ghetto that the school soon closed down. Everybody had to go to work, and people without work or a working permit were put onto transports and taken away. The transports were destined for Treblinka.

Work

It was a matter of life or death to get a working permit. I never managed to get one; I wasn't the right age. Nevertheless, occasionally I managed to get into the city to sweep snow or clean the German soldiers' barracks. Once I cleaned the floors for a German

officer and I found an onion on the floor; such a reward for all that scrubbing. After I came home and showed my mother the onion, my parents allowed me out more often on those working excursions. Most of the time they were genuine working excursions but, occasionally, people went out in the trucks and didn't come back. Our time in the ghetto was punctuated by constant change; it was deeply unsettling.

Word got round about employment repairing German Army uniforms in a place called the Optima factory. Everyone wanted to work there. Then one day we learnt that trucks had pulled up outside, and a large number of people from the factory had been rounded up and shot. Later on, that factory became a sort of collection point for the Jews who were to be taken away on the trucks. The SS, Hitler's special police force, would turn up at the ghetto, gather up some people, take them to the factory and lock them in, then go back and get a new lot. Our captors euphemistically called it resettlement; today we know that it was genocide. The only way to avoid the same fate was to get off the street and hide.

Another incident haunted me. I often went to an employment agency hoping to find work. On this occasion a truck was waiting, filling up with people being sent out to perform some kind of labour. We knew this really was a work detail – there were no SS around, only normal army soldiers, and a woman called Miss Sandberg. So we all wanted to get on that truck.

The vehicle was old. It was an open truck with rails to hold onto and seats along each side. It was crammed with people. Some were sitting, but most of us were standing, including my sister and me. The truck drove off very fast, and the driver misjudged a corner. Lots of people were thrown out, including my sister. She had hurt her neck and was bleeding badly. This worried us greatly as once you were physically impaired or bleeding, they would not let you back in the ghetto; they always shot the injured and sick. Injured Jews were lying all over the road, and cars continued whizzing by. Terrified, everyone struggled to help each other.

Fortunately, we managed to get back in.

To this day, my sister suffers from physical problems that relate to this fateful accident.

The resettlements

Whole transports of people were taken from the ghetto to Treblinka. Stories trickled through to us that at Treblinka people were made to dig their own graves then they were shot – their bodies falling straight into the graves. Two or three Poles from neighbouring villages would then be brought in to throw dirt over the corpses. News filtered back via these Polish villagers who witnessed what happened.

Who could believe that 'cultured' Germans would do this? They told us they were taking people out for all sorts of reasons and that children were being moved to orphanages or kindergartens where they would be better off than in the ghetto because there was insufficient food there. We were terribly afraid. No-one wanted to let their children go; nobody wanted to go on any transports – so the SS forced people at gunpoint. Those who did not obey were shot and left in the street. No options existed.

The SS used to arrive in trucks and surround the ghetto, shouting, 'Everybody out of the house.' They went through houses systematically and if they found anyone, they bayoneted them. Chaos reigned; everyone took to their feet and ran. We ran wherever we were told to go. Some people managed to hide, but most were herded into the middle of the town square and surrounded by SS brandishing their guns. Families, utterly distraught, would be desperately trying to stay together.

We did the same; we saw family unity as our source of strength. Provided we were together, we believed we could survive, no matter where they sent us. Still people had no clue what was happening to them; nobody wanted to know or believe what was going on. We were told that we were being sent to some factory or town to do work for the Germans. They were in charge and they needed workers. Who were we to object? We hoped that if we worked, it would mean getting food. I think by then we knew deep down that they were lying.

Luckily for us, also living in our house in the ghetto was someone who was receiving information from the outside – this person had a radio. From this source, we heard rumours that the ghetto was to be liquidated or reduced in size. And we were warned where the transports were going – mostly to extermination camps.

On one of these occasions, we all split up and went into hiding. Mother sent me to the house of one of her acquaintances living outside the ghetto. Before the war, this lady's house and ours were quite near to each other. It so happened that she had my mother's sewing machine and a few other bits and pieces, and they were valuable to her. When I got to her place, the woman told me that she'd seen my parents getting onto the transport, so I should go and join them. Of course I knew better than that because I knew where my parents were hiding. I didn't believe her and consequently I was worried that she might betray me to someone if I didn't leave her place.

Pretending to trust her, I left but as soon as I was out of her house I ran through the back streets to where my parents were hidden, which was at my father's workplace. It was an auto-repair garage where work was done on German trucks. The proprietors, people by the name of Folvark, knew that my father was Jewish, but as he had always worked with Germans, he spoke fluent German and didn't look Jewish. Occasionally, he would mispronounce words so the Germans would think, 'Stupid Pole,' and that's how he got by.

When I reached my parents at the auto-repair shop, they were unsettled by my story, but they listened to it carefully. My father told me to sit in an old car and not to come out until the emptying of the ghetto had been finalised. We discreetly re-entered the ghetto when the 'resettlement' was finished for that day.

For some time we managed to survive in this manner. Whenever there was to be a transport, we were warned and dispersed in the best way we could. Once my sister was caught, pulled out from the cellar, beaten by the SS and taken into the transport. Somebody who knew her helped her to slip back out of that transport. That day she survived, but what about the next time?

Some non-Jews tried to aid us. One person in particular, a pharmacist by the name of Pankiewicz, helped us a great deal. Later on, after the war, we found out he had assisted a lot of Jewish people. He was really a hero, a good human being.

But dodging the transports became progressively more difficult. My parents insisted I stay in the room and not go out any more. In reality, there was literally no place left where we could be safe from harm.

To Plaszow

In January 1943, my parents heard once again that the ghetto was going to be liquidated. This time, I was unable to evade it.

Mother equipped me with a good coat and warm clothes because it was the height of winter. I went with the very first transport to a place called Plaszow, where a new camp was to be established. There were 50 of us, all women.

Plaszow was less than 10 kilometres from the city, part of Krzemionki, where I had played as a child. Within sight of the camp was the grass-covered burial mound of Prince Krakus, the founder of the city of Krakow. According to legend, Prince Krakus once slew a dragon who lived in a cave below Wawel Hill.

The site of Plaszow Camp took in a Jewish cemetery; the rest of it was open space, an empty, beautiful green area. Yet that day was dark and cold. There must have been times when the sun shone, but it was always cold; I never saw the sun in Plaszow.

As soon as we arrived we were put to work. Our task was to dig the foundations for the accommodation 'blocks' that were to be built at Plaszow Camp. I was the youngest of the group. We set about our task with pick-axes, trying to dig in the hard, frozen earth. It was the end of January, bitterly cold. We were totally helpless and intimidated, and unable to do the work to which we had been assigned.

It was on that first day at Plaszow that I encountered Amon Goeth, the camp commandant. Huge he was, an enormously tall man – according to public records, he was 6 foot 5 inches, but to me he seemed at least 7 foot tall (well over 2 metres). He was rather overweight, too, in proportion to his height. Always well-dressed and groomed, he walked with a commanding gait. Almost straightaway we discovered that he was a sadistic monster.

Amon Goeth must have been watching us with binoculars from a distance. Although we were supposed to be digging, we were huddling together to try to get a bit of warmth. As he approached, we immediately dispersed and started to try to work, but he came in with a whip and began using it on us. I received a vicious beating. Then he picked up one elderly lady and threatened to shoot her. I turned my head away thinking, what will he do now? How can we possibly help her?

This kind of terrorising happened over and over again. Whenever we saw Amon Goeth, we worked as hard as we could. He beat us constantly. A punishment he favoured was to have people brought to his office, often at night, and he would beat them on their bare bottoms. Another habit he had was from time to time to don an elegant white silk scarf, of the sort that people wore to the opera. Soon we realised that when he put that on, it meant he was going to enjoy himself and shoot people.

Like most of us, I lived in constant fear of this man, this monster. This fear eased a little with the arrival in Plaszow of my parents at the beginning of March, when the Podgorze ghetto that we'd lived in was totally liquidated, once and for all. Their arrival gave me some sense of security. Although my mother, my father and myself weren't all in the same block, knowing they were close by meant a great deal.

By a stroke of luck, Mother was chosen to work outside the camp. For one thing, the guards who took work parties out were not as severe or sadistic as the ones guarding the camp. Better still, occasionally she would meet a particular man whom she had known before the war. I knew him as 'Pan Tadeusz', although that may not have been his real name, just what Father called him. He'd swept the streets in front of my father's office before the war, and Father used to pay him. Now, when he saw Mother, he tried to give her food whenever he could.

Mother wore a big black coat, and in the lining of her coat she could secrete the saucepan with the soup, potatoes and chicken that he was kind enough to give her. He hid it on the bridge near where he worked. Then, while he was sweeping the bridge, he would lift the saucepan up and hand it to Mother as she passed him on her return to the camp. So, frequently, Mother brought back something for us to eat, and we'd climb on top of the bunks to have the feast. The rest of the people in our block would say, 'Something smells. Who's got something? Come out, tell us!' They all wanted a little bit, and we always shared. As luck would have it, we had been put in with a lot of people we'd known well from before the war. There was even a friend of mine there, a girl I'd been at school with, and she slept with me on the top bunk. Mother was on the lowest bunk so she wouldn't have to climb.

After a while, work outside the camp was suspended. That was a pity. Mother was next assigned to the task of peeling potatoes for the entire camp. Mother worked with a group of elderly women in a peeling room, and so occasionally she had the chance to eat a little potato or put some in her pockets and bring it back to the block for us. We'd been supplied with little ovens, and we cooked the potatoes in those along with our meagre rations.

In Plaszow we were given a type of coffee in the morning and a piece of bread to which sawdust had been added to make it go further. It didn't taste very good, but we no longer cared what we were eating. In the evenings we received a portion of bread and a little soup. So when my mother brought potatoes to share around, it was really something. To this day I still think of these potatoes and how they were our only food of substance. Going through a supermarket and catching sight of potatoes is enough to take my mind back to the days in the camp at Plaszow.

Another memory is of Mother's deep concern about my growing so fast and not having enough food, because that was a sure way of succumbing to tuberculosis. Even before the war my parents had worried about the constant threat of TB. But wave after wave of tuberculosis went around, and I never contracted it. Up till that point I had suffered from various other illnesses, including typhus, but not tuberculosis. What I did experience were chronic stomach problems, cramps, ulcers, gallstones and the like.

By the time summer came, everyone had lice. It was unbearable. We were allowed one shower a week but were given nothing in the way of towels or soap or clean clothes to change into.

Occasionally, depending on where I was sent to work, I managed to sleep sitting up; even now I sleep with my eyes open. I realise that it was a kind of depression I had. Sleep was one way to get a break from the reality that closed in on us all hours of the day and night. I often used to hide to avoid being sent out to work. Without enough food, I was perpetually tired. I would wait for Mother to return, always hoping she had extra scraps of food for us with her.

It was an enormous relief for me to remain with my mother. She had always been a source of solace to me. Memories of going to sleep with Mother's arm around me had sustained me through some of my darkest hours. She was a short lady with a lovely big bust, cuddly and very kind. Having my mother with me was so comforting.

Father worked very hard physically and rarely complained. It was beyond his dignity to show how much he was suffering and only reluctantly did he accept food from Mother. Although he was wasting away, unfortunately he sometimes exchanged his food for cigarettes.

He lived in a different block; men and women were separated by barbed wire. Sometimes we managed to see one another, maybe in the latrine or by my sneaking into his block. It was dangerous, I knew, but we lived every moment of our existence against a backdrop of danger. Living in that camp was so dangerous, what harm could there be in a little more risk? Compared to before the war, our sense of what constituted danger just kept on widening, keeping pace with what we were now facing.

A regime of terror

We had to endure 'selections' in Plaszow. There was nowhere to hide, and we were usually called out on a Sunday. We had to undress, and the SS guards walked between us. They selected people who did not have much fat on them and they were told to stand off to the side. Women whose breasts were flat and hanging would be taken out of the rows of people, put aside. Many people were taken away – no doubt to Auschwitz for extermination.

The horror of watching families and friends being separated in this way will remain with me forever.

One particular Sunday afternoon we were told to assemble, the whole 10,000 or more of us who were in the camp by this stage. The guards counted us to ensure nobody was missing. Gallows had been set up, and before us stood ten tables. We were told that people who had tried to escape from the camp were to be hanged. We were told also that one out of every hundred inmates was to be shot that day.

Amon Goeth supervised the hangings; he took the leading role in every 'performance'. This was his own little show. One of the escapees, a former neighbour of ours from before the war, named Engineer Emil Krautwirt, had already committed suicide by slitting his wrists. He was hanged anyway. The second boy to hang went by the name of Haubenstock. Twice he fell from the gallows, which is normally taken as a sign that the person's life should be spared. But this was not to be. Had the hangman not done his gruesome work, Amon Goeth would have shot him. He had his gun at the ready.

Next came the beatings. I was one of the people pulled out of the lines. I was made to lie across a table with my pants down and I was whipped on my bare skin by an SS guard while Amon Goeth stood by watching the spectacle. I had to count aloud to 25 and if I'd stopped counting, I would have received even more. The strokes were very hard. The lashes left broken skin, and I was bleeding. I don't know how but I was able to do the counting then I jumped off the table, pulled my pants back up and stood there, utterly destroyed. It worried me that my dear mother and father would have had no choice but to witness the whole beating.

Next to be beaten on the table just over from me was Engineer Grinberg. He was the camp architect, and we had long known him and his family, although we weren't close. Engineer Grinberg passed out, and Amon Goeth called for someone to fetch a bucket of water to revive him before continuing the whipping.

I volunteered to get the water and ran to the next block. My intention was to hide, not to return to that hateful scene. But I discovered that someone else was in there hiding, and she made it clear that I was to stay out. Of course she was right. It's so clear to me now. I would have been missed, and when the guards came to search for me, she would have been discovered and ... who knows what could have happened? Heavy-hearted, I returned with the water. Poor Engineer Grinberg. He survived that day, but Amon Goeth shot him eventually. (I learnt that not so long ago from his daughter.)

While we were still gathered, another SS officer arrived. He was tall and of elegant bearing. Only quite recently, here in Sydney, I found out that this was Oscar Schindler. He persuaded Amon Goeth to leave the spectacle with him, saying, 'I've brought somebody downstairs, and you will have a good time. Leave them for next Sunday and come downstairs.'

It seemed that he'd brought women in for the officers to enjoy. I thought we might have to stand there for hours, because they often made us do that. Miraculously, we were allowed to go back to the blocks, including the hundred people who were to have been shot. My life was to be spared this time.

Oscar Schindler directly saved the lives of one hundred people that day, including mine. How this came about, how he turned up at that exact moment, I'll never know.

Later on, Mother asked me if the beating had hurt. Slapping my bottom to try to convince her I was fine, I answered that it hadn't. The truth was that my pants were stuck to my bottom, and it did hurt dreadfully. Being whipped publicly like that is humiliating; it dehumanised me for life. Not because the SS saw my nakedness, but because the rest of the 10,000 Jews who stood there had seen me. In front of virtually everyone I knew in the entire world, I'd been made to undress. Even today I suffer the emotional scars of those moments.

That was neither the first nor the last time I was whipped. Amon Goeth liked to pick on certain people. He always seemed to choose tall girls for whippings, and I wouldn't be surprised if that was a sexual perversion of his. In the early days at Plaszow, while we were building the blocks, using prefabricated materials, there were several times when I was one of the women chosen to be whipped.

Goeth had a girlfriend, a beautiful lady, tall and refined-looking. She liked riding horses; she often had a special white horse with her. After the war I saw her being interviewed and I almost felt sorry for her. She never did anything to us, unlike the SS women who whipped and hit us. It was puzzling that she could have been with such a monster.

Amon Goeth was an absolute terror in the camp. Nobody dared to face him; nobody dared to be out if they didn't have to. Outside, we worked with our heads down so he wouldn't notice us. I was petrified of him, even after I heard that he had been captured and was prosecuted in Krakow for his deeds. This was after the war had ended and I was in Austria. Despite knowing that Amon Goeth was subsequently hanged, his memory continues to haunt and terrify me. I have never been able to lose that fear. To this very day, a picture of him inspires a depth of terror in me. That fear remains with me. It is indescribable. I have a phobia of uniforms, even here in Australia.

Alone

One evening – it was dark, I remember – when I returned from work I found out that Mother was in the process of being taken away on a transport. A phrase spun around wordlessly in my head, 'This is it! This is it!' They'd come and marched off all the 'older' women, the ones over forty – Mother was forty by then – and even the young girls who had worked alongside them. Running as fast as I could, I made my way down to where the train was standing at the platform. As I approached, the cattle trucks came into view, their little windows covered with barbed wire. People were being herded on board. At that moment, I was desperate to be with Mother; wherever she was going, I wanted to go, too. The main thing keeping me going, keeping me alive, was the presence of my parents.

Suddenly I found myself being restrained by an SS officer, a short, tubby man named John. With his whip, he landed blow after blow on me, preventing me from reaching the train. As I struggled with him, I could see the guards locking the cattle trucks in readiness to depart. It was devastating. The train pulled out. Based on everything I'd witnessed, I assumed that the women were being taken to Auschwitz because they were considered too old to work. It seemed to me that I would never see Mother again.

With a heavy heart, I went to my father's block to find him, and he was equally devastated when I told him what had happened. His conclusion was the same as mine. We had lost Mother.

From that time on, Father became utterly depressed. He didn't want to go to work or to eat. The bread he received he traded for cigarettes. His decline was heartbreaking for me to witness. When he had to go out to work, he would fall over because he was weak from not eating. He was beaten and kicked; he developed ulcers on his legs and varicose veins; and eventually he couldn't walk any more. My father had lost all interest in living. That was the end for me, too; I stopped going to work in order to be with Father whenever possible.

We knew a physician, someone who'd lived in the same house as us in the ghetto in Krakow. At Plaszow, he worked at a hospital, a place to go if you were ill or injured. I went to him and begged for my father to be admitted to an isolation ward, effectively to hide him just long enough to give him a chance to recuperate. To my immense relief, Father was taken into that hospital. It was a weight off my shoulders just to know that he wasn't going to be beaten.

The morning after he was admitted, I went to visit Father. I'd brought a small cup of boiled potato peelings for him. For what seemed like an age, I waited outside the gate, but no-one came to take it from me. Something was not right. A bad feeling started to niggle at me. I stood there and waited and waited. Eventually, two people came out carrying a body on a stretcher. They stopped and put the body down. On impulse, I raised the blanket and to my horror I recognised my father. After the war, I found out that he had been given a lethal injection.

My grief and despondency is impossible to describe. I did not embrace Father. Motionless, I stood there as they carried him to a place where they were burning bodies up the hill. I noticed a landmark, a small crater. From afar, I watched the smoke, the burning of my father's body. I didn't cry. This moment has embittered my life for ever. It's always with me and that, too, I shall never forget.

It was later that I became close to a truly wonderful lady, Helcia Siegel, to whom I discovered I was distantly related, and who looked after me like a mother. Helcia said to me, 'If you survive, you have to say *Kaddish*, the memorial prayer for the dead. Your father's *Yahrzeit* will always be the day before *Purim*.' And I was able to accept that. Ever since I could, I have observed Father's *Yahrzeit* on that day.

But even as I stood rooted to the spot witnessing that awful scene in Plaszow, I had a strange, surreal feeling. A sense almost of relief came over me. I thought to myself, they have killed my mother, taken her to Auschwitz, and now my father is dead. I have no-one else to worry about. Just let them finish me. From that point I stopped caring about work because literally nothing mattered.

After the war, I went back to the spot where Father's body had been cremated. By then grass was growing there. I picked up a stone, something to remember my beloved father by. I want that stone to be buried with me or to be part of my headstone when I die. I

remember my father as a man who loved life. He wouldn't have had the slightest inkling that he was going into hospital for a lethal injection. Plaszow was supposed to be a labour camp, not an extermination camp. But that's where Amon Goeth had a different attitude towards us.

Daring not to care about anything

I became reckless. No longer did I automatically go to work. I tried to avoid doing what they told us to do. I had nothing more to lose. By then I was convinced that all of us were doomed to destruction, but it didn't matter to me any more.

In a strange way that attitude probably helped me to survive because I stopped wearing myself out by getting up at 5am to go to work and coming back late.

Often, I hid in the mornings, even though there were constant searches of the blocks to ensure that nobody stayed behind. Each block had straw sacks on wooden shelves – enough for about 500 people – set out in three tiers. I was able to squeeze myself underneath the lowest wooden shelf, which was very close to the floor, and work myself painstakingly along so that I was out of range – the guards often used to search under the beds. Luck was on my side. If they'd found me, I would have been beaten to a pulp or shot. I no longer cared.

For a while, I kept myself fed while everybody else was out labouring by working for the person who ran our barracks – it was part of her job to keep our block clean. In return for me scrubbing the floor, she gave me extra bread and extra soup. Nevertheless, I was still starving.

One morning, I ventured cautiously out of the block where I had been hiding. I think I was probably heading for the place where potatoes were being peeled, in search of food. I spotted a boy carrying a brown bag of bread rolls crossing from the bakery towards the block where the policemen had their office. I knew the boy; he was slightly retarded – *abukasz* – and he had been put to work as a courier between the police and the bakery. An SS officer appeared and asked the boy what he had in the bag. Then the SS man drew out his revolver and shot him. The bread rolls fell, the boy hit the ground, and I kept on walking. I didn't look in that direction because if I did, I would be next. I had been hardened into this reaction through necessity. There was no hysteria, no crying or yelling out. The young boy lay dead on the ground and I walked past. I told the lady who ran the barrack what had happened. 'He won't have to suffer anymore,' was her response.

The slightest thing revives these and other memories in me. I can never leave completely behind me the camp and all its horror. Later the situation became too risky. No longer able to hide, I did go back to work.

At one stage I worked in a leather workshop, making gun holsters and the like. The man in charge, the German *meister*, was an artisan. His hands were calloused from all his physical work. That workshop became the scene of a drama in my life and the *meister* one of the key players.

It so happened that a girl I knew at the camp was a manicurist and she'd been taken off in a transport. Her boyfriend, positive that I'd meet up with her somehow, had entrusted to my safekeeping her bag of manicure equipment, urging me to try to get it to her as it was the source of her livelihood. There was no choice but to carry the bag with me at all times; you could never be sure when you might find yourself suddenly being loaded into a transport.

One day, the *meister* noticed my bag and asked me what it was. Suddenly put on the spot, I told him the equipment was mine, that I was a manicurist. Then he asked me if I would mind working on his hands. Naturally I agreed, and he took me into his office. The difficulty for me was that I'd never even seen a manicurist at work, let alone had to clip anyone's nails. After carefully laying out the equipment, I took a deep breath and set to work, bluffing my way with appalling lack of success. To my horror, I even cut the quick of the man's nail, and it started bleeding.

Fortunately for me, he mistook my clumsiness for nervousness. 'Don't be afraid,' he said, handing me some bread.

Several times the *meister* asked me to do his nails and hands, and each time I did my best, worrying all the while that he would lose patience with my ineptitude and punish me. Instead, I was given some bread. But I knew the situation couldn't last and, before too long, I moved to the knitting workshop, which was lucky as you could work for long periods sitting at the tables. The job consisted of making heels and toes and working these into the hosiery for the army at the Eastern Front. It was there I encountered the wonderful Fulek Brenner, who was working as a machine knitter, generating work for us.

Auschwitz

I was moved from Plaszow. Knowing what I now know, it must have been around October 1944, but back then, time had lost its meaning. I was one of 1600 inmates taken away from Plaszow one day. We were locked up in cattle trucks with barbed wire over the little windows, just like the train that had held my mother. I don't remember how long the journey was, but it didn't seem long. Whispers went around that we were going to Auschwitz, which is 60 kilometres south-west of Krakow.

It didn't matter to me; it really didn't matter any more. I was not alone in this. We were mostly in a state of quiet defiance and resignation. My feelings fluctuated constantly. One moment I cared, I wanted to live. Like one time when I came very close to dying. Then I wanted to live. But otherwise, I felt we were going to die anyhow, so what did it matter when it was? The sooner, the better.

I positioned myself near the window, taking advantage of my height to read the names of the villages we were passing through. In my hand was a piece of brown paper. At one stage I wrote on it, 'We are going to Auschwitz,' and addressed it to my dear friend, Zoska, near whom I had grown up in the suburb of Podgorze in Krakow. Somehow it was passed to her. When we met again, in 1989, many, many years later, she showed me that scrap of paper. That brought forth so much emotion for us both. She never expected ever to see me again.

We did suspect we were heading for Auschwitz. But no-one wanted to believe it. We'd heard that from Auschwitz people only left as ashes. We were aware that we were being persecuted simply because we were Jews.

Auschwitz was a district, several suburbs in size, much like a small town. Different parts were devoted to different purposes. One part housed all the barracks for the labourers – building after building after building. Then there were the areas where the SS had their accommodation. And on and on it went.

On our arrival at Auschwitz, we were herded out of the trains like animals. Having been packed in, 500 to a carriage, we had great difficulty straightening our legs. We were marched off somewhere. As we went along, we caught glimpses of the faces of the people in the blocks, and they appeared to be fairly decently dressed. Later we learnt

that they were well-dressed because they worked in the store room. As for us, our clothes were falling off us; we were desperately tired and hungry; we were somewhere close to the border between life and death.

Eventually, we reached a certain block and were told to undress. Into one pile we were ordered to put our clothing, into another, our shoes. Any jewellery was to be handed over. None of us had any jewellery by then. Two rows of SS men had assembled, and we had to pass by them, completely naked. This was for selection. My mother's words echoed in my mind: 'Stand tall,' she had always urged me when we'd encountered these situations in the past. She'd also impressed upon me to say confidently that I was 18 years old whenever I was asked my age. I went through the first few rows, and one of the SS men cracked my arm and asked me: '*Wie alt bist du?*' – how old are you? I was skinny, with no bust at all, but I straightened myself up and replied that I was 18. But as I uttered the words, out of my mouth flew a little photo montage of my family that I'd hidden under my tongue. It contained pictures of my whole family, the five of us, and I'd made it in the leather workshop at Plaszow. The SS man began whipping me, kicking me. Then he ordered me to go to the left.

Smarting from my beating, I did as I was told. As I stood catching my breath, I noticed that the few people already there, selected from the first few rows, were all much older than me and extremely thin. So that was to be my punishment – I was to go to the oven.

Mentally, I took hold of myself. Our captors didn't see us as humans but more like beasts. To them we all looked alike – we were practically faceless. There were about 1600 of us in there. 'He won't remember my features, what I look like,' I reasoned to myself. When I saw my chance, I crawled away from that group, out behind the backs of the SS men and women who were facing the incoming prisoners. Carefully I re-inserted myself into the rows of people and for the second time found myself approaching the SS. As I went through again, I was thinking, 'If I get through, I get through. If I don't, I have lost nothing.'

This time I made it through the selection. I had survived – at least for the time being!

Before we were moved on to be washed, they allocated each of us a number. Like cattle about to be branded, we had to stand in line to be tattooed. As we waited, we watched the women doing the tattooing, and some of them were making a mess of it. Some people were being tattooed on the outside of their arms.

To a girl who happened to be standing with me, I said, 'Come on, let's go to this one. At least she's doing it on the inside of the arm.' The woman I went to did a neat job with my tattoo, placing it on the inside of my arm. My number is A216538.

In some ways like that, my survival instinct was always working so I could get through things the best way practicable. Not that I'm saying that's why I survived – there were people more intelligent than myself who didn't make it – but there were often little things you could do. My attitude towards my captors and towards my situation was something like that of a kitten playing with a ball of wool – to disregard them, make fun of them as far as possible. It was my way of getting through this horrific ordeal.

Next came the washing. We were ushered into a huge room, squeezed together like sardines. There were little taps in the ceiling. In my mind's eye I see us standing waiting and wondering. Will it be water or gas that comes through? The place was designed for both.

Each of us was issued with a tiny square of soap, and on every piece of soap was an individual number. What was it with these monsters that even a piece of soap had to have a number? There were always rumours floating around, always people who were ready to enlighten us. And the story here was that the soap was made from human fat. Could it be true? The washing proceeded, with the soap. Whose number was it on the soap we were washing with? I pushed the soap away. I didn't want to know or believe anything. It couldn't be that grotesque. Yet it was true.

It seemed beyond imagination when the showering – if you could call those meagre dribbles of water a shower – ended without incident. Strangely stunned, we filed out of the shower block.

The next step was to collect our clothes from the men and women of the SS. Each of us was made to pick up whatever garments we could at a running pace. I managed to grab a full-length sleeveless green evening dress with open front and back, a pair of knickers and a pair of clogs. Although still amazed to have walked out of that shower cell – to this day I'm convinced that at the flip of a coin we could have been gassed there – and glad to have anything to wear at all, I knew that with such flimsy clothing I would be lucky to survive the cold of the coming winter.

We were all kept moving on. Shortly I noticed that we were passing some autoclaves. A prisoner was at work, a diminutive Jewish man it was, busily dry-cleaning piles of clothes. Presumably he was sorting out the good-quality garments to be sent to Germany. As he transferred clothing from one autoclave to another, I spotted a big men's coat. It wasn't Polish in style. It was beautiful, made of pure wool with a fur collar. I ran over and seized it, explaining, 'Please let me have that coat, I need it. With my figure, I won't exist very long in Auschwitz in an evening dress that covers neither my front nor my back.'

The man replied, 'I can't give you the coat. You'll get shot; it's got a fur collar.'

I pleaded with him, asking where he was from, explaining to him that some of my family came from the same place. Terrified of the potential repercussions from the SS, he struggled with me, trying to wrest the coat from my grasp. Desperate, I fought back with all my might; my life depended on it. Fortunately, he was smaller than me, and I won the coat.

Eventually we arrived at the barracks we'd been assigned to. They were freezing cold, empty, just wooden boards to sleep on. We slept like sardines in the clothes we were wearing. If one person turned over, we all had to turn over. In the morning we awoke and sat around, wondering what was to happen to us next. We continued waiting. In the afternoon, the guards passed around food – some soup, a piece of bread, a spoonful of jam and margarine. That took us all by surprise – giving us jam and margarine before sending us to our deaths? This was the pattern of our first few days in Auschwitz.

It was within days of my arrival there that Helcia Siegel once again took me under her wing. She was a lady 20 years my senior. Her daughter, Bronusia, had been taken away in the same transport as my mother. Coincidentally, Mother looked after Bronusia during their trials, as I was later to discover. You can imagine the bond I developed instantly with Bronusia when eventually we met! Such wonderful people. Helcia shared her food with me because she felt I needed it more than she did. We helped each other and we formed a very close, caring relationship, a tremendous bond. Often, if I did something like scrubbing the blocks, I would be allocated extra bread, which I could then bring to her.

We both survived Auschwitz. I have heard that place referred to as 'a wound in the order of being'. There were many such wounds, too many.

Helcia died at the age of 85, in Israel. I continue to keep in contact with Bronusia and her family. When my granddaughter, Marisa, went to Israel and she met them, the account of that meeting brought tears of joy to my eyes.

Working in Auschwitz

After a number of days passed, the SS came to choose people to work. Helcia and I volunteered. Doing something, anything, was always better than sitting around waiting and becoming desperate. Working usually meant slightly better clothes and sometimes more to eat, at least that's how most people viewed it. I volunteered to go to a sewing compound, and we were marched off, through some fields. Many years after the war I saw the film *Sophie's Choice* and I was struck with how brilliantly it portrayed the marching we were forced to do by our captors. That film conveyed the atmosphere so well. As we crossed to this the next uncertain stage of our lives, everything was dark. Our feet sank into the mud as we traversed the fields into Auschwitz proper.

Our new accommodation was in special blocks called *muster lager*, meaning 'camp for show'. It was the part of Auschwitz that was displayed to the Swiss Red Cross. Our particular block had red polished floors. Upon arrival, first of all we had to wash, then we were given a prison uniform and footwear to replace the clothes we'd been wearing, all of which were riddled with lice. I was sorry to part with my lifesaving fur coat, the one I had fought tooth and nail for, but at least I had other clothes. Helcia had her head shaven, and somehow we managed to obtain a scarf for her. Every tiny scrap of dignity we could hang onto was a plus for survival.

In *muster lager*, our 'exhibition compound', we were given a little paper money as wages. It was useless money; we couldn't buy anything with it. I assume they gave it to us to try to persuade the Swiss Red Cross that they were paying us. And in the next camp, divided from us by barbed wire, there were men we could talk to and find out where they were from and who was there. Occasionally girls found their brothers. I found no-one to ask about my brother. Neither did I ask after my parents as I believed they were both dead.

We were put to work in a sewing workshop, repairing the uniforms of soldiers from the Eastern Front. Whenever we came across coats pierced by bullet holes, which was frequently, we would show them to each other. By exercising the utmost care, we managed to remove the lining from some of the coats and make rough garments to wear underneath our prison uniforms. It helped us to keep a little bit warmer during the height of winter. In return for our audacity, we could have been shot; that was an ever-present risk. How little we cared by then; we were long-since beyond that way of thinking.

Today my family knows not to ask me to sew anything for them. No way will I sew any more. Ever. It's one of those things that takes me straight back to times in the camp. Times of unrelenting fear. Uniforms, especially police uniforms, have that effect on me, too.

I was on night shift. After work, we had to go back to that block. As at Plaszow, I slept on a top bunk. Leaving the block during the day to go to the toilet was forbidden, so we used to urinate into canisters and then empty them in the evening before going to work. All of us were totally matter of fact about it. You had to do it to survive; you can't sleep if your bladder is full, regardless of how tired you are. And there's something about extreme cold that makes you want to go the toilet more than normal.

I always had to be careful that I didn't eat from the same canister I had urinated into. Or that I didn't upset the canister and have its contents rain down on those below me. Occasionally, such accidents would happen. When they did, the person responsible would sing out, 'Don't worry. It's just cold coffee.'

The laundry

Being a curious, adventurous person by nature, I was always wondering what conditions were like in the other working details. At Plaszow I had been the same. I managed to talk to a girl who worked in the laundry and I wanted to see for myself what it was like working there. We swapped – she went to sewing and I went to laundry.

The laundry group was small. It was nice and warm working there. And there was water and soap, which was great. You could wash and dry your clothes in one day while you were there, which I did.

Some of the clothes that we were supposed to wash and dry were better than what I was wearing. I saw an opportunity to change my clothes that day. Under my prison uniform, I put on quite a few dresses, possibly five or six. At the end of the shift, one of the soldiers who were counting us as we passed out of the building noticed that my body looked too fat for my face and legs. He came over to me and told me to undo my uniform, which I did. Then he made me take off my clothes. As the dresses came off me, he counted them and whipped me. I thought I'd had it. Then the other soldiers started to laugh. They were army, from outside the Auschwitz compound, not SS. I had to take everything off until I was left with one last item. And I was beaten.

Afterwards, I put my jacket on again and I carried on back to my block. There, Helcia attended to my wounds.

What a day's escapade. I had got away with my life but never again did I return to the laundry.

Retribution

One morning, when we returned from work, we were told not to enter the block but to go to the quadrangle. This was where we usually assembled to be counted. There before us was a gallows from which the bodies of four girls were hanging. A man stood there, pushing the bodies with the handle of a whip so that they would sway.

We were told that the girls had tried to steal gunpowder to detonate the oven and chimney. It seemed that they almost succeeded. At least they managed to do some damage; that's how it was discovered that they were stealing the powder. Today, my understanding is that they were smuggling gunpowder out of the camp somehow, getting it to the people in the Resistance, who then used it their acts of sabotage against the Germans. At the time, we didn't know about that, we thought the girls only wanted it to try to destroy the camp.

Seeing them hanging there – such young girls – was a soul-destroying experience. I can never dismiss that sight from my eyes. Nowadays, if ever I am watching some film, particularly if it's a western, and it seems that there is about to be a hanging, I have to turn off the television because the image of those four girls returns to me. At the sight of a rope I have to close my eyes quickly and go and do something else to try to cast out from my mind the vision of that moment in Auschwitz.

Departure from Auschwitz

Week after week passed. At no stage did I ever know the date or even the time of day. It did not seem all that important, either. Maybe some of the older people kept a better

track of it. They seemed to know when the Jewish holidays were; they said their prayers. I lived more from moment to moment, always with the attitude that I could be shot or sent to the oven at any time. This is another mental habit that stays with me to this day.

Being so thin and tall I was especially vulnerable because the weak and the old were mostly the ones chosen to be killed. It was well known that if somebody was sick or couldn't walk properly and they were pulled out from the group, we wouldn't ever see them again. They went to the ovens. We were well aware of what was going on, even if we never saw anything with our own eyes. Among the work units, or commandos, at the ovens there would generally be someone who managed to get word back to the rest of us. You always be someone who had a reliable contact – a brother or a friend – who knew the situation. Every now and again, when the Germans felt that a certain commando knew too much, those workers would themselves be killed. The smell of burning bodies was always with us; smoke poured from the chimneys constantly.

One night on the way to work – I always worked night shifts at Auschwitz – we noticed that the sky beyond the camp was all lit up. It was beautiful, almost like the dawn. 'Stalin's candles' – Russian flares – were responsible for this spectacle. But what could it mean to us? Later I discovered that Russian soldiers had been standing on the other side of the Wisla, the river that ran through Krakow.

The following day – it was the night of 17 January 1945 – we were shoved hurriedly into the cattle trucks once again. The SS were tremendously agitated. 'Quick!' they shouted, the Russians are coming!' Stalin's candles lit up the whole camp, and the Russians were bombing the SS blocks. Who among us got the information from whom, I shall never know, but hearing that the Russians were so close gave us a huge surge of strength. We were convinced they would save us.

But it wasn't to be. We still had to wait to regain our freedom.

It wasn't that one ever gave up; one always wants to live, even through the worst depression and suffering. We kept telling ourselves that the war had to come to an end sometime, that there was hope. What was so hurtful, so disappointing was that we were being massacred, and this went on and on and on. No-one in the world cared. It was probably because we were Jews. It's much like the situation in Sudan right now. Everyone sort of shrugs, as if to say, 'What could I do about it?'

At one stage the Germans had offered to trade concentration camp inmates for trucks, but the West had refused, worried that the Germans might gain some military advantage from this. Our time in hell was not to be cut short. Nevertheless, here we were on this day, leaving Auschwitz. It was unheard of. Jews had never left Auschwitz other than as soot up the chimney.'

As soon as the cattle trucks were crammed full, they set off. That unsettled us. Where were we going? What were they about to do with us? There was nothing to indicate that we might survive. On and on we drove. A week or more passed, and still we were cooped up in those trucks, driving along. Occasionally, the guards opened the sliding doors and threw in a bucket of some sort of grain – maybe buckwheat – and we would all try to reach out for it for it, desperate to eat.

On a few occasions, the convoy was bombed. When that happened, we climbed out of the trucks and walked along the train lines until the next lot of cattle trucks became available. We sometimes picked our way along the train lines, walking between the

tracks, for quite long stretches. Snow lay all around; our clothing was inadequate; the SS marched us along with no water.

Many people perished on that journey. We were squeezed into the cattle trucks so tight that it was an effort to breathe. I tried to work my way towards the windows. Although I had more air being by the window, I had to endure more of the freezing cold. At least I could watch for clues as to where we were going. We seemed to be in Germany. We were actually heading towards the camp at Bergen-Belsen.

On arrival at Bergen-Belsen we were unloaded like livestock. We got out of the trucks and walked and walked and walked along the driveway leading up to the camp proper. On the left-hand side, as we passed, we could see people standing in big wire enclosures like cages. We couldn't approach them, and they couldn't get out. Nor could they communicate with us. Much later on, I learnt that they were people from Hungary who possessed Swiss papers. How they obtained them, I don't know. They had been told to remain there and that they would be transported to Switzerland.

At the time, I suspected that my sister could well have been among those people. I was constantly on the look-out for her even though I had no idea what fate had befallen her.

After the war, I found out that those people had been used as hostages in exchange for trucks and money. What eventually happened to them, I don't know, as I did not remain in Bergen-Belsen for long.

As we entered the camp of Bergen-Belsen, we were met with sights of misery and horror. Everywhere we turned we saw people who looked like walking corpses, each one with diarrhea and blood running down their legs. The inmates had all stripped away completely the lower part of their clothing because it had become too soiled – they had to run from the blocks where they slept to the trenches – there were no latrines at Bergen-Belsen. Some people were unable to make it back to their blocks. As they sat at the trenches, they died there.

We observed all of this as we walked in. Dead people were being dragged out of the block where they'd slept, and if a piece of bread happened to fall from the blanket covering them, others ran to take it, not caring that it was undoubtedly infected with typhus. Such were the depths of degradation to which the Germans subjected people. Not a shred of decorum or modesty remained among any of the human beings at that place.

Scarcely had we been there a fortnight when there was a call for volunteers to work. Again Helcia and I were among those who stepped forwards. We were piled into another cattle truck, and so the gates of the hell that was Bergen-Belsen closed behind us.

After another lengthy journey, we ended up at Venusberg. It was a particularly small place and it seemed better than Auschwitz, and certainly better than Bergen-Belsen. Nearby, in the woods, was a factory that was manufacturing components for aeroplanes, and that's where we girls went to work. Some of the girls I worked with there are still alive today.

It was at Venusberg that I started nursing sick people. Our captors put me in charge of the small clinic there, and I did what I could to look after people when they fell ill. One woman came and told me that she was expecting and was desperately worried about the health of her unborn child. Pregnancy was something that had to be hidden from the Germans. There was no hope of receiving any kind of dispensation or more humane

treatment. If anything, it gave the soldiers more of a reason to annihilate a person. Fortunately, I was able to ensure that she ate for two by giving her extra soup. Somehow I heard eventually that the woman gave birth to a healthy baby and they both survived.

My time in the Venusberg dispensary was short-lived. Soon I developed typhus and spent day after day on my bunk, terribly ill. Helcia Siegel and the girls I knew came around in the evenings to see how I was. If I wasn't up to eating my soup, they would take it so they'd have a little bit more nourishment.

At one stage somebody covered me with paper to keep me warm. When someone died, they used to cover the body with paper before taking it away. I was so ill that I was hallucinating and I imagined the paper meant I was about to be carried out to be burnt. In another hallucination, I saw my mother leaving the block. She was telling me, 'I've been bombed but I'm okay.' It was a boost to my morale to visualise her alive.

They say that truth is stranger than fiction. After the war, Mother told me that she had indeed been bombed in much the same way as I'd pictured in that hallucination.

Mother had been put to work in a factory inserting a lethal yellow substance called pitrine into bullets. The stuff blocked her tear ducts and caused Mother a great deal of pain during her later years. It was that factory, in Skarzysko Kamienne, in Poland, which had been bombed.

Transported again

Exactly how long we remained in Venusberg, I don't know, but our time there was brief. When an enemy army started approaching, the Germans disbanded the factory. Yet again, we were loaded into cattle trucks.

This time our destination was Mauthausen. It was an extremely long and arduous journey. We either travelled in trucks or else we marched. Mostly we were on foot. This was a so-called death march.

Helcia and I tried to force ourselves to stay at the front whenever we had to march. If you were at the end, it meant you were losing strength. Many people were shot along the way, their corpses simply left where they fell. Some managed to run away and hide, hoping they would come across the approaching armies. The rest of us pressed on, day after day, with no food or water, no toilets.

One night, we went into a barn to sleep. After so many days, the Germans who were guarding us decided to sleep in a village. They probably didn't know what to do with us any more. All of us fell asleep, including the Germans – and they took off their shoes. By that time, my shoes had fallen apart and my feet were blistered and bloody. The sight of a good pair of leather shoes was too good to be true. I took them, put them on and covered them in some rags. In the morning, I heard the soldier looking for his shoes everywhere. Eventually he gave up and I kept my treasure.

Once more, we were pushed into trucks. At last we reached our destination. We went the last part of the way on foot, picking our way up the hill to the camp at Mauthausen.

At the top of the hill was a quadrangle facing four ovens. Instantly, we recognised what they were, and our guards confirmed that they were ovens. They also told us that there would be a wait while someone went off to get certain chemicals. We knew that these

would be needed to destroy our bodies after we were killed. The plan was clearly to gas us first and then to burn our bodies.

While awaiting the return of the courier with the chemicals, our captors tossed to us small quantities of food – chocolate, figs, cocoa, tins of sardines and so on – as though they were handing out feed to animals. I can't hope to adequately describe that situation. They had dehumanised us to an unreal extent. Here we were, our deaths imminent, and still scrabbling on the ground for chocolate. We had no-one to rely on but ourselves, and they had destroyed us mentally, emotionally, in every possible way. To bend down and pick up food standing in front of an oven, its doors big enough so anyone could walk inside. Why shouldn't they shoot us before we walked in there?

I see angels

The following morning, we entered the compound. The soldiers who'd been guarding us locked us in. I was terribly ill. We lay down; Helcia lay next to me and looked at me. I was dying. That's how I remember it. How long we remained like that, I don't know, but it couldn't have been all that long.

And so, at a certain moment, Helcia said to me, 'Don't die, the Americans are here.'

Just how that was possible, I couldn't imagine. Why would the Americans or Russians care about us? Who were we that they should worry about us? That was firmly implanted in my mind. Helcia bent over to me and put her cheek to my mouth to feel if I was still breathing. Although I couldn't talk, I touched her cheek with my teeth to let her know I was still alive.

A little time passed. I saw figures walking into the compound, beautiful white clouds and white figures in them. I assumed I must have died. Surely these were angels and I was in heaven, I thought.

My angels proved to be American soldiers who had come to liberate us. Clad in suits to protect them from the chemicals, they were spraying DDT before they allowed us out of that compound – every one of us was riddled with lice and typhus.

That day was 9 May 1945.

Adjusting to freedom

Few details of the time of my liberation are clear now. I don't remember actually waking up in the hospital part of the camp. I do recall looking around that place and seeing some people with drips, some being fed vitamins. We were treated extremely well. Another memory I have is of being carried by a soldier, in his arms. I was taken outside to be photographed. The gown I was wearing was open at the back and I was worried that my family in America would see me naked. I was alive enough to be aware of that!

Someone told me that Helcia was in another room, that she was dying. I went to her. As she had done for me, I urged her to hang on, doing all I could to pull her out of that dying process. I managed to convince her to pull through.

In July, three months later, we were put into American army trucks and taken to Czechoslovakia. Travelling with us on this truck was a friend of mine. I noticed that she had terribly swollen feet. She was suffering from a kidney problem. Ever since I'd obtained them, I had worn that German soldier's shoes. They were a brilliant find because I could never get shoes long enough. I wear size 11. Although I had been determined to hang on to them, I gave them to my friend. Her need seemed greater. Her

limbs had swelled up to the size of piano legs. At least she could arrive back in Poland with something on her feet. I felt sorry for her and gave her my shoes. Years later, I met her again – in Bondi. By then she was elegantly dressed, with nice shoes.

Later on, we were given more clothes and I got another pair of shoes. They were made of navy blue fabric with leather caps. I had to cut the caps off them in order to accommodate my long toes. It wasn't attractive, but I had no choice.

In Czechoslovakia, I have memories of eating the most beautiful potato soup and rye bread topped with caraway seeds. The taste is still with me. From there we went on to Krakow. I was searching for people I knew. That search would occupy me for a very long time.

After about four days in Krakow, someone told me that my sister was living in Budapest. Without hesitation, I gathered my few pieces of bread together in a handkerchief – I had not a single other possession – and I went to Budapest by train.

At that time, anyone who'd been liberated from a camp could travel free of charge. People were going all over Europe trying to trace family and friends. As people arrived at the processing centres in the large cities and were registered, their names would be posted on lists so that anyone could come by and search for familiar names.

I arrived in Budapest, still dressed in my camp uniform, not speaking the language, without knowing anyone.

After the war, Jewish people kept together, always clinging together, creating a sense of community, little ghettos everywhere. So I got in touch with local Jews and made enquiries. They immediately gave me contact details for my brother-in-law's brother.

Sure enough, somehow I stumbled across my brother-in-law's brother. A superbly elegant man – he had a jewellery store – he immediately wanted to help me to make myself presentable. He took me to his place, where he opened a wardrobe and tried to give me some of his wife's clothes. She was a lovely petite lady who was always well-dressed. She used to wear wedge-heeled shoes, size 6. I couldn't fit into any of them.

He wanted to take me to lunch, and I joked, 'I'll walk behind you so you don't have to be embarrassed.' Unfortunately, he didn't catch onto my humour! The only thing evident to him was shame. We went to a very nice restaurant called Buczynsky. There were lots of tables with red and white checked tablecloths. The place was practically empty but on each table was a basket with bread rolls. That sparked an awful memory. Such mixed feelings came up. What immediately came to my mind was the image of the boy with the bread rolls who had been shot. This awful association has been a constant in my life since that day.

Since the war, certain things – like the bread rolls – have automatically triggered vivid memories for me. I try to dissuade myself from thinking about whatever it happens to be and turn my attention to something else. It is a horrifying experience, but that's how my life is. I know I must not dwell on anything that brings such images to my mind. Yet the extent of the horror is such that they are not so easy to dismiss.

To this day I remember that restaurant meal. I recall the taste of it, a beautiful chicken and vegetable soup. I asked for the other bread rolls as well, and my companion said, 'No, you won't be hungry ever again. Don't take those bread rolls.' I think he was embarrassed. Yet he knew nothing of the deprivation I'd been through or what it does to a person trying to survive on the barest minimum of food. I couldn't come to terms with

it. I badly wanted to go back to that restaurant to get those bread rolls. At that stage, I was unable to restrain myself. I would see a piece of soap and think I'd better take it. Leaving the habits of survival behind me proved to be extremely difficult.

Even now, whenever I buy bread, I have to eat a piece right there and then. I rejoice that I have a whole loaf of bread to myself.

I found my sister in Budapest and tried to make it my home. For the next several months, I worked at learning the language. Without fluent Hungarian, I was limited in my job prospects. My sister tried to help me. Her friend's niece, Lilka, was also back from the camps.

From time to time I returned to Krakow, searching for family members or friends who might have survived. My great hope that my brother, Szymek, would return from Russia was crushed when I met someone who'd come back from there. 'Don't wait for your brother,' he told me, 'because he's not alive.' Szymek had died in Siberia of typhus. He was only 17 years old.

Right from the beginning, before we went into the ghetto in Krakow, Szymek had been sent to L'vov – which at that stage of the war was in Russian hands – to stay with my mother's sister, Mala Schechter, who had no children of her own. She was in charge of an orphanage, and her husband was a Polish army officer. So my parents thought this would be a good place for my brother to survive. Mother and Father sent him off with a rucksack full of clothes and food and a beautiful long overcoat. We never heard from him again. He was a very tall, extremely good-looking boy. I have a grandson of my own who reminds me so much of him.

We heard later that when the Russians came into eastern Poland, they gave people a choice of going to Russia or to Germany. Szymek, in his naivety, thought he would return to the ghetto to be with us. He opted to go back to Krakow because he missed us all. And that was sufficient for the Russians to send my brother on a transport to Siberia, where the temperatures were unbearable.

A lot of people went to Russia and survived the war. Overall, they fared somewhat better than those of us who remained in Poland.

Franciszka, my sister, managed to escape Poland early in the war. She married and initially made her life in Hungary.

As for my mother's parents, who had always lived in the village of Siedlecza, they met a horrible end. One day, along with everyone else in the family, they were rounded up by the SS. They were forced to dig their own graves, then they were shot.

Mother

People were still coming back into Krakow from the camps, and I heard that my mother was on her way, so I waited and waited until she arrived. The first thing she asked me was about my father, and I could say no more than that he had not survived. How could I tell her he was given a lethal injection shortly after she left? It was a terrible burden.

I never did tell my mother or sister how my father died. I held guilt over his death. The same doctor I'd begged to put him into hospital gave him the lethal injection.

It turned out that Mother had never been in Auschwitz. She had worked in labour camps and had been liberated in Germany. She couldn't walk very well. It had taken her several days to return to Krakow.

I took Mother back with me to Budapest. There she was busy looking after her first grandchild. She had a role; she was needed.

But I found things difficult. People in Hungary had lived free through the war. There was an 'us' and 'them' feeling, an awkwardness. They didn't ask about the camps, and I remained silent. They couldn't understand, and if I brought the subject up, the response was, 'Don't talk about it, it upsets you.'

I so badly needed somebody to understand what we had been through. It is extremely difficult to try to explain the way we survivors felt at this time. All our feelings seemed to have died in the war. It was as if our captors had ripped out our emotions. We did not rejoice or feel like celebrating. It took a good forty years before we survivors really began to talk about our experiences.

I didn't begin to menstruate until after the war. A lot of women stopped menstruating and had problems conceiving; many could not conceive at all.

To everyone who had known me before the war, my survival was a miracle. I had been a sick child. During the severe winter in Poland, I often came down with the 'flu or pleurisy or pneumonia or all three. My father would buy me an orange – to have an orange in winter in Poland meant that you had double pneumonia!

Father had such a special kind of humour. If he had to explain his jokes, he'd eventually wave his hand, as if to say, 'Never mind.' Occasionally he'd ask, 'Have you got a toothache?'

Why? I'd think. I have not complained.

'If you have a toothache, I will buy you a vanilla slice.'

So I always had a toothache on Sunday afternoon.

Deciding to leave Hungary

My career as a courier came to an ignominious end when I was caught with a great deal of gold and cash on me. In the immediate term, I was in danger of being sent to Russia, where I could be shot – and at the very least raped by soldiers. Fortunately for me, I was pretty streetwise. There were numerous people on the truck. So I lied and said the money, \$1000 English pounds, wasn't mine.

Extremely happy that no-one admitted owning my booty, the Russians pocketed it. Upon my return to Budapest, I told my employer what had happened. It transpired that the money was counterfeit, so they were fairly relaxed. I was furious. These people had been sending me off to buy gold, using counterfeit money, endangering my life. I quit.

There and then I decided that I had to take charge of my own destiny, and that I was on my own.

My first plan was to go to America to be with my auntie, who lived there, and I hoped she would sponsor me. Many people wanted to go to America, including all my remaining family. I felt so indebted to the Americans because they had liberated me. The sticking point was that I had no English, and there was no possibility of getting to any classes. My situation seemed hopeless. I would have to leave Hungary.

To Austria, and then where?

About four of us decided to go to Austria, to Vienna, via an illegal border crossing. We hid in haystacks and so on, but we made it. As a parting gift, my sister had given me a suitcase full of new clothes, US\$10, and a carton of Camel cigarettes. I never spent the ten dollars – I kept it as a symbol of my freedom. The cigarettes were to help me in case I needed to bribe someone, and I did.

The guide who took us over the border from Hungary to Austria needed to be paid. He wanted to be paid in more ways than one. This man was a Hungarian peasant! Luckily, he was able to be fobbed off with my carton of Camel cigarettes.

From Vienna, I was sent to a Displaced Persons camp in Enns, and there I remained for at least two years. During that time, I worked as a volunteer in the hospital, following in my mother's footsteps. I also had regular correspondence with my family.

Once at the DP camp, I couldn't have gone back into the Russian zone to be with my mother. All I knew was that in the long-term, I wanted to go to America and my family would follow. That was the arrangement. In fact, nobody remotely followed that plan. No-one came to Austria, where I was. And by the time they got to Paris I, too, had moved on. Later, they moved to Paris. From Paris, my mother went her own way, and my sister and her family eventually settled in Frankfurt.

At the Displaced Persons camp I felt free, but I was in a dilemma. What do I really want to do with myself? Wanting to start a normal life somewhere, I applied to go to several countries overseas, including Israel. There was a group of us at the DP camp, and we all decided that whichever country answered first, that was where we would go. England decided to take us.

England

Preston is the place I was sent to initially. It is a large coastal town in the north-west of England, north of Manchester, and it had escaped serious bomb damage during the war. To be honest, my first impressions weren't exactly positive. I found the place cold, wintry and wet; and the bread was thin and not at all like 'real' bread. Undaunted by these relatively minor disappointments, I was eager to begin my new life.

At first, I was informed that I had to go into domestic service. I refused, which caused some consternation. I wanted to go to school; I wanted to become a nurse. That was my ambition, to do some good and to give something back to humanity. I'd decided that as God had saved my life, I must do something with it. I fought tremendously till the authorities relented and sent me to work at a hospital near a small town called Barrow-in-Furness. I was delighted – until I set foot there.

My new place of employment was called Roose Infirmary. It wasn't a proper hospital; neither was the work proper nursing. It doubled as a place for unmarried mothers and an infirmary for aged mental cases, people who could not wash themselves or care for themselves. All I did was wash people, bring them bedpans.

Yet another hurdle faced me, the thick local dialect. I struggled to understand what people around me were saying, and when it came to making myself understood with scarcely a word of English, I was really at a loss. How was I ever going to fit in? I looked different; I sounded different; my communication was terribly limited. Loneliness shadowed me. There was so much inside that I needed to express, but the possibilities weren't exactly forthcoming. Then the wonderful Brenda Levi – an older woman who became my mentor, my saviour – came into my life.

A sister at Roose Infirmary, Sister Bateman, told me to get in touch with Brenda, a German-speaker, hoping that I would be able to communicate with her. But the very fact that Brenda was of German extraction made me have serious misgivings, so I didn't make contact. Eventually, Brenda telephoned me and said, 'Nurse Scherment, I know why you don't want to contact me ... I am Jewish!'

Brenda had suffered from Polio as a child. Consequently, her legs were in callipers, and she was confined to a wheelchair. Living with Brenda and her family was her 80-year-old father, with whom I conversed in German, and we, too, became firm friends.

I can still picture Brenda's home, the table set for Friday night dinner, the immaculate, beautiful white linen, the candles. The Levi family told me to come always and, without fail, offered me a warm Shabbat welcome. Brenda gave me tremendously needed moral support.

I felt I belonged for the first time in such a long while. I was happier.

Not only did Brenda's family welcome me with open arms, but Brenda also drew me into her social circle. Her friends started to invite me to their homes and so on. My life in England took off from there. The more I understood about life and about the English, the more amazed I was. They tried so very hard to extend their generosity.

Sister Mabel Scott was one of the people who invited me to her home. She was a friend of Brenda's from schooldays – everyone who made the effort with me was a friend of Brenda's, really. Going home with someone involved an overnight stay as public transport was limited. Anyway, I accepted, even though I didn't necessarily feel at ease. What shocked me when we were about to retire for the night was that Sister Scott showed me upstairs to the spare room, where she'd made up the bed for me, and handed me a potty. A potty? I wasn't a child! I was aghast. When she explained that the toilet was outside, I was convinced that a potty was indeed my best option.

Poor Sister Scott. Once I got to know her I learnt that her daughter had fallen in with a soldier during the war and became pregnant. The young man went off to war, never to be seen again, and the pregnant daughter, so burdened by despair, tried to jump off a bus. Instead of losing her life, she lost her leg. So tragic.

Another time, a couple of friends invited me to see Al Jolson perform. It was supposed to be a treat, a great opportunity, but when he sang for his 'Mammy', it touched sadness deep inside me for I, too, was crying for my mother. Nothing would stop my tears. My friends were mystified, but there was little I could do to shed light on my reaction.

Some of the patients at Roose Infirmary turned out to be great characters. One of these was Dorothy Riddell. She was fairly young and, sadly, crippled with rheumatoid arthritis to the extent that she couldn't even feed herself. My job was to wash her and make her bed every morning. One morning, she signalled to me that she wanted her teeth cleaned. I immediately went to the sluice room to get a kidney bowl to collect the water from her mouth. Then I set about finding her toothbrush, toothpaste and so on. Meanwhile, Dorothy Riddell was laughing her head off, which mystified me until I asked her to open her mouth. She was all gums! Her teeth were a set of dentures in a cup on her bedside table. From that time on, she had only to catch sight of me and she'd break into laughter. What amazing spirit that woman had.

Another patient I'll never forget was a very sweet lady in her nineties named Granny Smith. Bedridden or not, by virtue of her seniority, she was the unofficial boss of the ward. I liked her a lot. One time, she heard me say that I was about to have my day off.

Quite incorrectly, she assumed I would be going into town. I had no reason to go to town; it was a long way and there was nothing there I wanted to do. But I wasn't going to turn down Granny's request when she asked if I would get her some apples. When she added that she wanted Granny Smith apples, I was sure she was having me on. I went into town; I tracked down some lovely red apples. She and I were both confused. Eventually I realised that it hadn't been a joke, that there is such a thing as a Granny Smith apple. I always think of her when I see one.

No-one was aware that I had been in German camps. Someone once spotted my tattoo and asked if I had been to war. 'Did you go to camp because you were a prostitute?'

'No, I went to camp because I am Jewish.'

They were shocked.

While in Enns, I had received a letter from my mother informing me she had remarried and was now living in Slovakia. It was understandable. She had fewer alternatives than I did for making some sort of life for herself, for obtaining some sort of security.

Her new husband, Arthur Goldman, was an older gentleman, 20 years her senior, and almost fanatically religious. He was very grateful to have a wife. He loved my mother deeply, but didn't know how to show his feelings to her. Reading between the lines, he seemed possessive.

I wept at this news. I felt more alone than ever. But I knew I had to swallow it and move on with my life, which I did.

It was through Brenda Levi that I ended up working as a nurse in London. She was adamant that London would be a better place for me, that there was nothing for me in Barrow-in-Furness. Even though I wasn't properly trained, she arranged to have a certificate made for me stating that I had worked as a staff nurse.

Brenda was right. Once in London, I was better off. I could meet people with whom I had more in common, realise my potential more. And I had lots of wonderful experiences. I went to the opera, to Sadler Wells, to the theatre. Life opened up.

I was able to get back in touch with the friends, Genia and Mundek, from the Displaced Persons camp with whom I'd travelled out to England. It was wonderful. They had become engaged and invited me to their wedding. Unfortunately, it was beyond me financially. The fare alone was prohibitively expensive, then I would have had to buy a nice outfit, and a gift. In the end, I bought them some brass candlesticks, which I posted to them, and wished them a long and happy marriage. Now they live in Sydney, where they have made a good life. And those brass candlesticks are still in use, I am told!

The nurses I worked with in London were all lovely. I had a great social life and met plenty of people.

There was also romance. I am afraid I hurt one man terribly. He called me 'my Polish princess'. He didn't have the foggiest idea that I was Jewish.

Speaking of princesses, I must confess to being a royalist. It's part of my Jewish heritage – when you see royalty, you make a blessing. Imagine my excitement one day when I happened to be in Hampstead Heath and I saw Queen Mary stepping out of her enormous Rolls Royce. On another occasion I saw the two princesses, Elizabeth and

Margaret, going by in a carriage with the Queen Mother. It was during my day off work; I was near Victoria Station at the time.

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth wasn't to be missed. A couple of other nurses and I found out where to go, then spent the night there before the big event. I managed to position myself so I could watch through the gaps between the soldiers' legs as they stood to attention, lining the roads. This was shortly before I left for Australia. It was my final ceremonial farewell to London!

Despite such highlights, and no matter how many friends I made, I felt as though I was drifting along, alone in the world. Although desperate for genuine closeness, I was wary of becoming too friendly with anyone, afraid that I would lose their friendship and be disappointed, that everything would be snatched away, as it was in the camp.

I maintained what contact I could with my family. I used to receive long letters from my sister from all kinds of glamorous holiday destinations around Europe. Whenever I had holiday leave, I would head to Frankfurt, where by now she and her family were living. They ran a successful kosher restaurant in the heart of the city and worked long hours. My sister and brother-in-law were always lovely to me during my stay. Niusia, my sister, always bought me beautiful, elegant clothes, and lavished me with presents.

Time passed. Another letter arrived from Mother. She was writing to tell me she was going to live in Australia. I requested leave from my job so I could visit her before she left. The doctor in charge granted me two weeks' holiday.

Off I went to Italy, and getting there was a long story in itself. I didn't know what name my mother was travelling under because by then she had remarried and my knowledge of her situation was terribly limited. Because she had been living behind the Iron Curtain, all her letters were censored. I had no idea where she was staying, nor what boat she was catching.

I went to look for her in Genoa. A hotel porter who was trying to drum up business, thinking I was a tourist, was agitating to take my luggage to his hotel. Somehow I ended up telling him my whole story, speaking in German, and he kindly helped me look for my mother until 2 o'clock in the morning. Finally, we returned to the hotel, and he said, 'Go to sleep. Tomorrow morning I'll pick you up and we'll look for your mother.' In the morning, I came down to the dining room, and who should be sitting there but my mother and my stepfather!

Sailing for Australia

I, too, came out to Australia. Even though I had already completed all the formalities, all the paperwork and so on, for British nationality and I was merely waiting for it to be processed, I still felt that desire to be with Mother. In fact, I had seen my name listed in the newspaper, which is how people found out that their papers were ready to be collected. For all I know, I may have been a British subject for all these years. I gave the matter no heed, just concentrated on gathering together enough money for the boat trip, and off I went.

The voyage out was wonderful. I sailed on a ship called *Moreton Bay*, part of the Shaw Saville line. We docked at Sydney on 16 November, having sailed via Fremantle.

Following her marriage to Arthur Goldman, my mother had become strictly religious. As my boat had arrived on the Sabbath, she was unable to meet me. That was painful

for me. Fortunately, friends picked me up and they took me to my mother's house at 175 Glenayr Avenue, Bondi.

Mother and her new husband were very observant of the Sabbath, which meant that having a shower was out of the question – so I was stuck in my clothes all day.

Mother and my stepfather, Arthur, whom I came to address as 'Uncle', lived in what we now call a semi-detached house, a small one. It was terribly cramped once I arrived. There was no spare bedroom so I slept in the lounge room. As Uncle would come in and pray at 6am each morning, I had to make sure I was up before his arrival.

Regardless of any small discomforts, it was wonderful to be with Mother again, to be able to have lunch together, just the two of us, and to talk. She had to be careful to ensure she served her husband his evening meal promptly when he came home from work. He was very particular about observing the faith to the letter of the law. We had to make sure that even the toilet paper was pre-cut for the Sabbath. And television was taboo; Uncle didn't want to risk anyone seeing a lady insufficiently covered up. Essentially, I felt that Uncle demanded Mother's complete attention. It didn't seem that there was much room for me or my feelings. Mother worked hard sewing ties to supplement their income.

Mother was so sincere in her beliefs. Never did she deviate from her observances. I suspect that she hoped that if she was pleasing to God, maybe my dear brother would be found alive and well one day. Even if he had turned up with a Russian bride, he would have been welcomed with open arms. But, sadly, this wasn't to be.

To be honest, I was making my own sacrifices, making different contracts with God. I do have a sense of a higher power controlling us. I feel that the entire universe is interconnected, everything from the stars and the earth, all the way through. And God did look after me.

I found a job sewing, doing overlocking, over the Christmas holidays, then I worked as a presser. In 1953 I resumed my nursing career, working at the Scottish Hospital in Paddington.

Love and marriage

In 1954, I met the man with whom I was to fall deeply in love. We didn't get off to an auspicious beginning. Determined to marry me off, my mother and stepfather had set about introducing me to all the single men they knew in our area. They were mostly elderly, aged in their sixties and seventies. I was polite to these men, but I certainly was not interested.

One day, a young man turned up to visit. He was Rudy Shaw. He had come straight from work – at that time he worked with his parents in a grocery store. He told me his life story, trying to impress me because he knew Frank Sinatra. On and on he talked. I pretended to listen.

The truth was that I was upset about Mother trying to marry me off. I had travelled halfway around the world to be with her. She wanted very much for me to settle down but I felt that I was being pushed away.

Eventually Rudy mentioned he had a car. A car! We could go for drive. Off we drove to Macquarie Lighthouse, at Watsons Bay, where we promptly got bogged in the sand. As

I waited with him for the NRMA, I realised he was a kind person, despite his brown suit and black shoes.

The same night, we went to a Polish restaurant in bohemian Kings Cross. I thought I might enjoy a night out, even if I didn't intend to pursue the friendship. I ordered frankfurts and sauerkraut, the cheapest meal on the menu. I didn't expect to be seeing Rudy again. But I found myself agreeing to a further outing.

One Saturday, Rudy took me to the football. Imagine my delight when I recognised one of the players from the camp at Plaszow – by his legs! He had been instrumental in saving a number of us from beatings. In Plaszow he'd been known as Fulek Brenner, but his name was Raphael. At the camp, at one stage I worked in the same knitting workshop as him. Fulek had been a knitter before the war. Having knowledge of knitting, he had been put to work at the knitting machine. We were making socks for the German soldiers fighting at the Russian front. Fulek produced knitted tubes by the armload, and the women used to do the finishing – knitting the toes and the heel into each sock by hand. There were about a hundred of us, all seated at tables. It was a good job because it was indoors, but if the SS ever found us sitting idle, we were likely to be beaten.

Fulek had such an enormous capacity for work. He laboured sometimes night and day to ensure that none of us sat with no work to do, and that the demand for socks would be met.

We all became very dear friends. Raphael and his wife, Kitty, were made guardians of our children, and their children are still very close to me. Our grandchildren – my Ryan and his Joshua – were together at Vaucluse Public School. Raphael lived a happy life in Sydney with his wife and children till the day he died. Recently I was honoured to attend the celebrations for the birth of his great-grandson. What a significant occasion that was for me.

But now I've jumped ahead of the story of Rudy and me.

Rudy was a wonderful person, well-educated and extremely understanding. He'd left his native Austria before the war, or just after *Anschlöss*, and made his way to America via Czechoslovakia and Poland. He was on his own. His immediate family had gone to Palestine.

Rudy stayed with an uncle in New York and worked as a wharfie while he completed high school. I think his real education took place on those wharves. After he finished high school, he moved to Los Angeles, leaving some precious personal possessions in the care of his uncle – big mistake; he never saw those things again – and attended the University of California, Berkeley. He worked as a caddy to support himself, which is where he came into contact with the likes of Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford. I think he spent some time in Santa Fe at some stage, but I'm not sure about that sequence of events.

When Rudy found out his parents had moved to Australia from Israel, he came out here, too. He worked at the grocery store with his family. He finished his commerce degree at the University of New South Wales. Rudy was such a happy man.

We were married in August 1954 and we started our married life in a rented unit at 103 Carrington Road, Randwick. First we had our beautiful Tamara – she looked like Elizabeth Taylor. Our twins came along in March 1957, and our family was complete.

Eventually we bought a four-bedroom place at 151 Belmore Road, Randwick, for £4000. It looked like Hansel and Gretel's house. It was in a bad way; it was neglected and dirty. We didn't have enough money for paint so we scrubbed the walls. We slept on a straw bed in the unpainted room, while Tamara slept in the clean room.

Later, we put Tamara in a bed, and the twins had a drawer each in a large commode. I was scared to go to sleep in case someone burgled us during the night. Imagine what would have happened if the robber closed the drawers, not realising there were babies sleeping inside. We were ecstatic that we had our own home, even though we didn't have a stick of furniture.

Rudy spotted an advertisement for some second-hand furniture. Some people were selling some items that had been in storage for a while. We agreed to spend £18 and take the lot – beds, chairs, tables, everything. We paid the local greengrocer £1 to bring it all to our home; he and Rudy went together. As soon as they pulled up at Belmore Road, the greengrocer told us that the furniture was full of white ants.

I rang the lady we'd bought the goods from and told her that it was illegal to sell something in that condition. So she gave me back the money. I organised the people from St Vincent de Paul to take away the furniture. But when they came to pick it up, they told me it was in perfect condition. The ants had been through but they'd gone. The furniture was no longer infested. God was looking after us! We kept the furniture and the £18, although I had to battle with Rudy about that. He was extremely uncomfortable about keeping the money.

As we only needed one bedroom, we decided to rent the other rooms to boarders. An Asian cook from the hospital moved in, as well as one Polish student. They wanted me to cook for them, but I said, 'I only cook Polish food.'

'That's okay, we love Polish food,' came the reply.
So they were given potato soup for dinner.

We lived in Belmore Road, Randwick for six years, during which time the house appreciated in value to £10,000. In 1965 we bought 36 Boronia Road, Bellevue Hill for £14,000. When we moved to Bellevue Hill, we stayed in the small flat out the back while we did some renovations. We were living on top of each other but we made it comfortable for the five of us. I still live in the same house, and the flat remains unchanged from that time.

Rudy was working for Nestlé by this stage. He had a good position, heading their Market Research Department. Occasionally, I'd accompany him to a work function or a cocktail party. We were used to mixing with other foreigners, not Australians, so to start with I wasn't sure what to expect. I was surprised at first by the informal atmosphere, by the fact that the other corporate wives dressed fairly casually and drank beer. But they were warm and friendly and I found I could be relaxed with them. I certainly stood out. There was no way I could pass myself off as an Aussie with my looks and my accent.

Rudy worked hard but he always walked in the door at home at five o'clock on the dot. If there was a lot of traffic on the road, for instance at Easter time, his secretary, Miss Judy Edwards, would phone and say that Mr Shaw would be a little late getting home.

The children always loved the big box of Nestlé chocolates the employees' families received at Christmas. And we laugh now when we remember how Rudy brought home a prototype of the Chockito bar from the first sample batch to arrive in Australia. The

girls didn't like it. Just as well he didn't put too much emphasis on that piece of market research!

Rudy and his secretary, Judy, used to buy weekly lottery tickets. One day I was in the laundry doing the washing when I heard on the radio that two employees from Nestlé had won the lottery. The next minute the phone rang. I thought to myself, 'That'll be Rudy,' and it was.

'Henia, darling. Are you sitting?' he asked. 'We won the lottery.' He and Judy split the money 50:50. We received £6000 and were able to do up the house.

We lived comfortably, went on holidays and travelled overseas. Occasionally Rudy gave lectures at conferences around the world, and I was able to travel with him. I felt so blessed to be with Rudy, with the children and my mother.

Speaking of Mother. A funny thing happened one day when she and I were out walking. Tamara was at kindy. Yvette and Naomi were just babies at the time. I was pushing them in their big pram. It was getting on towards lunch. 'You push the pram slowly,' I suggested to Mother. 'I'll run home and start grilling the fish and it'll be on the table by the time you arrive.' Poor Mother! She was little over 5 foot tall, and the cumbersome pram went into the gutter – and the twins fell out onto the road! People rushed to help. The girls were both fine, but my mother totally lost her nerve. After that incident, she never went walking on her own with them ever again.

I loved spending time with Mother. We used to go on little shopping excursions to David Jones. I turned into a bit of an Imelda Marcos; I used to love to come home with a new pair of shoes. Imagine, being able to get nice shoes to fit me whenever I wanted! Mother's weakness was good-quality underwear.

They were the happiest years of my life. Rudy was gentle and he loved me. He knew how to resolve my inner turmoil; he really pulled my mind out of the camps and helped me to live each day. He was tall and solid, the strong, silent type. He spoke like Henry Kissinger.

If ever we had a disagreement, Rudy would say, 'Henia, darling, we'll discuss this later.' Or we'd go for a walk. He had strong values, and had no wish for the children to witness any conflict between their parents.

With his three beautiful children – Tamara, my eldest – she looks the most like her father – and Naomi and Yvette, the twins – he was strict but not harsh. He cherished them; he didn't discipline them. If ever he was away overnight, he'd write letters to us.

He loved soccer. We used to all go to Wentworth Park with him on weekends. Rudy would go in and watch the match. Our daughters would run around and collect empty soft drink bottles to sell. We'd meet up afterwards at the entrance. I used to gather the girls together, pull myself to my full height and stride through the gate as if I was the Queen of Sheba with my royal progeny. 'I'm Mrs Shaw,' I'd say, 'and these are my children.' The guy on the gate would wave us through without paying. I have no idea why he did so or who he thought we were.

I was less enthusiastic about the sport than Rudy. My preference was to sit near the players' entrance – so I could see the players' legs as they came onto the field.

Ours was a particularly happy marriage, but unfortunately it was only a short one, just 17 years. My beautiful husband developed cancer and passed away on 25 March 1970.

He had always been a perfectly healthy man; he swam daily at Nielsen Park. He caught pneumonia only to die 18 months later from lung cancer. I went with him to the doctor for the initial consultation. ‘Just tell me it isn’t cancer,’ I told him. They reassured me that everything was fine, and by the time it was clear that they’d been mistaken, it was too late to do anything.

I nursed my darling Rudy at home. Pauline Berns and her dear husband, Dr Bill Berns, extended to us the utmost consideration and help, as did Dr Lou and Leah Bernstein. Bill and Rudy had been close friends for years. Pauline would drive us to the hospital and back again. Rudy only went to hospital if a procedure was required, then I’d get him home so I could look after him properly. I did everything in my power to make him as comfortable as possible.

I hope when I die that Rudy and I will be together again.

The children were young when their father died – Yvette and Naomi were three days off their thirteenth birthday and Tamara turned 15 on that very day. People didn’t know how to console Tamara or how to wish her happy birthday. Birthday time is still difficult for the girls. Tamara was attending Dover Heights High School, and her sisters were at Sydney High. We had prepared the girls as best we could for the inevitable, but it was still so traumatic for them to see their head teacher come into their class room, to call them out and for them to go home from school like that. Imagine the hush that would have descended on the class. Even 30 years later, former fellow students recall that day to Naomi and Yvette. It was such an unusual event for someone at the school to lose a parent. Apparently there was a public announcement made at assembly about it. So Naomi and Yvette had a kind of notoriety to deal with as well as the sadness of their loss.

Losing Rudy was devastating for all of us. We had all lived for each other. I can picture my mother weeping and wringing her hands and saying over and over, ‘How are we going to manage without Rudy?’

As for me, I was prostrate with grief. Sleep would not come unless someone stayed with me. Never will I forget the patience of Danny Adler, who could have only been about 19 years old then. He used to sit on the floor and talk to me until I nodded off.

Friends would ask, ‘Are you alright?’ How could I possibly be alright! The girls and I were invited for dinner many times. We went. It was hard for me to make myself go.

People were very kind. Miss Moore, the headmistress of Sydney Girls’ High School, would ring me to keep me informed about Naomi and Yvette’s progress. That was totally unexpected. She was an extremely caring and compassionate person.

We followed the Orthodox practice and had a full year of mourning. That meant Tamara, Yvette and Naomi weren’t allowed to attend functions where music was played. So that they wouldn’t be totally cut off from their peers, they would be driven to a dance by our wonderful and caring friend, Danny and they would sit outside in the car. Their friends would come out and talk to them for a while. Then they’d drive home. They got by.

Slowly, I came back into the world. Little by little, I picked up the threads of my life. Now I can see that Rudy’s loss was immense. He missed out on seeing his children grow up, graduate and marry. He was never to see his grandchildren. That is so sad for him.

I say to this day that my daughters brought me up, not the other way around. The girls were my reason for living – otherwise my life would have ended when Rudy died.

After Rudy passed away, I still had my mother for a couple of years. Eventually she became ill. She moved in with us for a while then later she went into a nursing home. I used to visit her three times a day. She passed away on 3 August 1973. My daughter Tamara was away in Israel at the time. Telling her that she'd lost her Baba Mina was hard.

The death of my dear, sweet mother was so emotional. With her went my last immediate link to the past. As a result of the constant separations with loved ones in the camp, and no doubt because of all the dreadful losses, I had found it hard to form attachments to people. The vulnerable part of me – the part that one shares with loved ones – had frozen over. With Rudy I had thawed out, bit by bit, only to suffer yet another agonising loss. I yearned desperately for closeness, and the contact I craved seemed always to elude me, even at times with my mother. Now all possibilities with her were closed off.

And I was still mourning Rudy. My whole world seemed to cave in. Was my boat sinking this time? The knowledge that my children were young and still needed me helped keep me afloat. Looking back, it was I who needed them.

On a more philosophical note, I can console myself that Mother was no longer young. She died peacefully in her sleep. She has a headstone, and that is more than the millions of Jews who are buried in unmarked graves, including my father, whom I loved dearly.

Managing – just

When my husband passed away, things were pretty tough for the four of us. Without his income we were not financially secure, but we managed – one day at a time. I had received a lump sum from Germany several years before Rudy's death and with it I bought a boarding house in Mosman, at 27 Harbour Street, as an investment. We leased it out for five years, then when I needed to support my daughters and myself, I ran it as a boarding house.

It provided an income and some stability but at times the boarding house was an additional source of concern. The people who lived there were all characters, each and every one of them down on their luck. They all had hard lives but in different ways. Some of the boarders suffered from schizophrenia or other types of paranoia. Being a nurse I was able to cope with that. I used to encourage them to take their medicine. Sometimes they would not pay their board and would steal the furniture. In fact, the majority of the tenants were well-known to the police.

On the positive side, those people made me laugh and they helped me to remember how fortunate I was to have my family. My tenants were all alone.

Furnishing Mosman was a story in itself. Many a time a mattress would be needed or some other furniture, and I'd cart it from Bellevue Hill to Mosman on top of the car. Invariably the ties that held it would come loose along the way.

One particular day, I was driving over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the mattress I'd been carrying blew right off. The person in the car behind me drove alongside and yelled out, 'Hey, love, your mattress is lying on the Bridge.' There was absolutely no way to stop, pick it up and re-attach it, so that was the end of that.

One of the boarders was a man called Frank. When I first met him, he communicated by a series of grunts. I'm happy to say that, as I gained his trust bit by bit, I managed to socialise him to the point where he'd say, 'Yeah. Alright then,' or 'Where's the grub?' It was a 200 per cent improvement on the Frank I first met. And he did well for himself. He arrived on a bicycle, but when he left, he was driving his own truck. But, getting back to the story, Frank was quite handy at doing odd jobs, like painting and repairs. So I used to get him to do things for me. If ever Frank decided, for whatever reason, that you'd done the wrong thing by him, he would undo all his handiwork! Because of the restrictions imposed by his pension, he didn't ask for much cash. So, in return for his labour, I used to feed him and take care of his clothes, things like that. And he preferred his own company so I let him live in the room out the back at Mosman, which suited him very well.

One day he came to me and told me he wasn't happy. An elderly lady, another of the boarders, used to get up during the night and make herself hot drinks. And this was upsetting Frank. He was keen for me to ask this lady to leave. I was forced to draw the line on that occasion. 'She reminds me of my mother, Frank,' I explained to him. 'If she wants to get up in the night, that's okay.' Frank decided he wasn't able to accommodate this fellow lodger's habits and he left. But he did come back eventually and, as I say, he did alright for himself.

My girls say that they learnt a lot from those Mosman days, too. 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

Naomi eventually took over some of the responsibility for collecting the rent. She has her own stories to tell of the years managing Mosman. Eventually we sold the place. Those tenants paid peanuts, but at least we had some much-needed cash flow. I had a variety of jobs over the years, which also helped.

The first work I took on after Rudy died, which was in 1970, was in a factory. Just part-time. I was physically and emotionally grieving. Full-time work would have been too much; I didn't have the strength to cope with such demands.

I worked in a swimsuit factory. I worked in the Feigen handbag factory. I worked at the Albert Park Ice Skating Rink. Later, I worked as an interpreter for 11 years; I have a smattering of six languages.

Those skills helped land me a job as chaperone for an international beauty pageant. That was a funny experience. It lasted for two weeks and it was utterly glamorous. David Hasselhof and Peter Allen were involved. My role was to see to it that the girls didn't fraternise with anyone. People kept trying to persuade me to turn a blind eye to the girls slipping out at night. I ran a tight ship, I can assure you. Nothing untoward happened on my watch, but I had a few good laughs at the shenanigans.

Another job I landed was working as a nurse at the Prince Alfred Ice Skating rink. That came about because while I was there with the girls, a child's fingers were run over by a skate. Straightaway, I jumped up and ran over to help. The management offered me the job on the spot.

With the money from my German pension and Rudy's pension, I had enough to buy food and some clothes for the girls. They all found themselves weekend jobs; they never asked for things we could not afford.

It was hard for the girls growing up without a father. They missed him.

We became a strong family unit; we were four determined, spirited women. Jobs were divided up – one paid the bills; one put out the garbage, things like that. There weren't any other family members to help pick up any pieces for us. Rudy's family are alive today, but the girls never got to know them. The day Rudy died was the day they chose to walk out of our lives. So self-reliance was our way through; we had no choice but to get on.

I was strict with the girls. Still, we used to laugh a lot about all sorts of things. Like a pendant I bought in the '70s at a market. I used to wear it a great deal. It was rather interesting to look at; it was actually a roach holder – for Marijuana. The girls still tease me about that. But I found it useful. Whenever my daughters introduced me to a new friend, I'd say, 'Do you like my pendant?' And if they had no idea what it was, I'd be confident they had nothing to do with drugs. If they did, well, they wouldn't be invited to my house again.

It's a blessing that my daughters have married men who can handle strong women, and who are not worried by the bond we four share. We remain so close. I consider myself extremely lucky in that respect.

I am grateful that my children were born in Australia and have received a tertiary education. All three of them went on to university or college after finishing high school. They all have degrees. One became a teacher, one a social worker, and one works in Human Resources. All have pursued careers involving working with people and helping them.

I am also grateful that my grandchildren have all been born in Australia.

The things that matter to me

My daughters have all married wonderful Jewish husbands, Bernie, Lennie and Jeff. That was important to me, although I am almost embarrassed to admit it. I always said to them, 'As long as they are decent, as long as they are nice'. But, to be honest, I felt deep down that you can't mix water and oil. The girls knew this and they gave me a hard time about my position, saying, 'You teach us not to be prejudiced, not to be racist, and you're telling us we should marry Jewish boys.' I assured them that I'd never told them that they had to but I also said it would make life easier if they were to do so. And that I did say. But in my heart, I was always praying that they would marry Jewish husbands.

All the grandchildren, the ones who are old enough, have received a Jewish education. I feel extremely emotional, and totally privileged, to have seven grandchildren – Adam, Carly, Avi, Marisa, Ellen, Ryan and Mikaela. I feel very proud that I have instilled in them a love for Judaism. Somehow it helps me – to know that my suffering has ultimately had a purpose, to know why it was worthwhile surviving. Let's hope that the Jewish religion and way of life will survive and will be passed on to the grandchildren and to the generations that follow. I hope they will remember all that. But above all, my dearest wish is that they should lead decent, fulfilling lives.

Why did I survive? I think it was just because of good luck. A few times I managed to help myself, as in Auschwitz, when I knew I'd been selected to be gassed, then I slipped out of that group and went through selection a second time. Not many people would have done that; they wouldn't have thought as quickly. Managing to get extra bread in Auschwitz, when Helcia and I were starving, was another effective strategy. If you starve then you are weak, and if you're weak you don't survive. Always responding that

I was 18 years old when anybody asked, always ready with the answer. That also made a difference. I also believe that those who kept working throughout were better off.

I don't think there was anything about me that helped me survive. I was just particularly lucky. Helcia was with me the entire time. She was a true lady, as is her daughter, Bronusia. Helcia kept giving me her bread in Plaszow, when I was sick and I needed it. Not many people had that kind of relationship, where somebody was willing to go to such lengths. I'm sure that helped, especially after I'd had typhus. I doubt I could have made it through without her strength, her positive influence and her kindness.

Then again, survival is in many ways cruel. The suffering doesn't end.

I've been interviewed about my Holocaust experiences by many different people over the years. Some were very brief. In an hour, you can't explain things well. I feel, too, that several interviewers had their own agenda.

Talking about my experiences stirs things up for me. I suffer dreadfully; I can't sleep. But no matter how many nightmares I suffer because of him, Hitler is dead, and I am alive.

Healing

In 1989, while Poland was still under Communist rule, I returned to visit my non-Jewish friend, Zoska. Her friendship had helped to restore my faith in humanity. At a time in history where having anything to do with Jews could jeopardise one's personal safety, she and her family had welcomed me into their home. That was while we were living in the ghetto. Now, 46 years later, she welcomed me once again.

It brings tears to my eyes to think of her kindness. Even though I had booked a hotel, she insisted that I stay with her in her one-bedroom apartment. She gave up her bed for me. Towards the end of the Communist regime, food was scarce. Zoska had put enormous effort into preparing food to welcome me. That is the kind of person she was.

Despite the fact that we hadn't seen each other since girlhood, at Warsaw Airport we recognised each other instantly. It was as though we'd never been apart.

Before going to Krakow, we spent some time looking around Warsaw. As we made our way to the Warsaw ghetto monument, Zoska was about to ask someone for directions when I found myself grabbing her arm to stop her. That old fear from my ghetto days, when it was dangerous to be a Jew in Poland, still existed in me. Zoska was dumbfounded. She pacified me, even though she struggled to understand my overreaction so many years after the war.

When we reached Zoska's home in Krakow, she showed me that scrap of brown paper on which I'd written to her, telling her that we were leaving Plaszow, possibly for Auschwitz. I'd thrown it out of the train window. The fact that she'd ever received it was a miracle in the first place, but it touched me so deeply that she'd kept it for all those years, a memento of a neighbourhood friend from her childhood.

Together Zoska and I revisited the places of our early youth. She also accompanied me to the camp at Auschwitz, holding my hand tightly every inch of the way, supporting me.

Words fail to convey the meaning for me of that day in 1989 at Auschwitz. The night before we went there, I tossed and turned in my bed. Trepidation needled me through

the hours of darkness, but in the light of morning the determination was visible in my face. Why did I go back there? To bury ghosts; to bury the ghosts of all my friends who were sent to the left; to try to come to terms with that chapter in my life.

As Zoska and I entered Auschwitz, we encountered a party of Israeli children, aged 15 and upwards. They were there for the inaugural March of the Living, a program that brings Jewish teens from all over the world to Poland on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. They march from Auschwitz to Birkenau – it is the largest concentration camp complex built during World War II; some 3.5 million Jews were exterminated in Europe, people from many different countries, and most of them lost their lives in Auschwitz.. The second part of the march takes place in Israel on Israel Memorial Day and Israel Independence Day respectively. The goal is for these young people to learn the lessons of the Holocaust. For young Israelis, with army service ahead of them, they develop a much more rounded understanding of why they have to bear arms for their country. Israel came into being because of what happened during the war. When I first set eyes on these Israeli youths they were standing in a group, all wearing their navy tracksuits emblazoned with the Star of David and all holding small Israeli flags. There was no mistaking where they were from. Instantly I wanted to go over and speak to them, to say Shalom, even though, as Zoska pointed out, I didn't speak their language.

Excusing myself from a bemused Zoska, I let go of her steady hand and started to run towards the group, just a few metres away. Suddenly a sturdy arm grabbed me from behind and, in excellent but stern English, I was asked what I was doing. Instantly I went into shock. It was as if I'd never left Auschwitz at all. Just as quickly, my reaction changed to anger. All my life, the knowledge that I had actually walked out of Auschwitz alive had given me a certain satisfaction and now someone was daring to question my motives in that very place. Fortunately my interrogator dropped his aggressive tone and quickly established that I was from Australia and that I had been in the camp at Auschwitz. His whole demeanour changed. Avi was his name, and his job was to protect these teenagers from possible harm. He conducted me personally and most respectfully over to the group of children and introduced me to them. That day, I was the only survivor of Auschwitz present. Silence fell. Instead of bombarding me with questions, as I had expected, they all just looked into my eyes and enclosed me in their circle. It was like an embrace.

The poignancy of that gesture was deeply affecting. From having been racked with anxiety about what I would feel in that place of awful memories, what disastrous effect it would have on my state of mind, suddenly I felt a sense of being at home. No more did I need to be afraid here; those young people were with me. I knew then that I could cope.

Avi invited me to participate in a memorial service with the group. How delighted I was to be able to do so. During the memorial service as I stood at the back listening to the *Kaddish* being said, in my mind's eye I saw all the faces of my friends who had gone to the left, never to be seen again. I see their faces to this day. 'Left!' meant you went to the oven. 'Right!' meant life. Maybe later you went to the oven. At that moment it felt as though their souls were close-by. Perhaps, like me, they were moved almost to tears as they listened to a young man play the violin – that violin cried. It cried.

A particular presence I felt was that of Helcia, who had been my guardian angel from the time we first met at Auschwitz. Prior to 1989 she had passed away at her home in Israel, well into her eighties. So strongly did I sense her with me in spirit on this day in Auschwitz that I found myself almost wanting to talk to her.

Avi came up to me holding out an Israeli flag and said, 'We would like you to stand with us.' I took the flag and I stood with the group at the entrance to the crematorium. Again the Kaddish was said, and this time they also sang the Hatikva, the hymn of Israel – *hatikva* means hope. I listened to their pure sweet voices, and as those notes rose into the air, I experienced a potent sense of realisation: 'I have survived.' To be able to be in that place, knowing I had three beautiful children and seven grandchildren, to hear that music, and to know that Israel exists, I knew fully and deeply I had come through; that the Jewish people have survived; that hatred had not won out. Since that day, whenever I hear the Hatikva I dissolve; it has become so rich in meaning for me.

It is almost impossible to convey the emotion of that day, just how much those experiences revived me. So many people had warned me against going to Auschwitz, believing it would be too upsetting for me. What I felt that day was a sense of connecting of the past not only with the present but with the future.

Zoska and I wandered around; she was at my side the entire time we were there, lending me her strength. At Birkenau, when I glimpsed the barracks where I'd slept, I had to turn my head away. Later on I saw some of the Israeli youths sitting, weeping uncontrollably. They had lost forebears in the Holocaust. Confronting that history was too much for them to handle.

How grateful I am that I found the strength to join those students for that memorial service, to have been surrounded by their shining faces – the faces of the future.

Zoska guided me back to her home, gave me a cup of herbal tea and helped me into bed. I was drained to the core of my being.

In 1989, I did a great deal of healing. My beautiful, wonderful Zoska has since passed away, but the strength, the gift, of her friendship will stay with me forever.

Epilogue

Why am I doing this book? I did the Shoah interview for the Spielberg Foundation – with great reluctance – above all else because my children asked me. 'Mummy, please do it,' they said. 'We want to know what you went through.' Now, I realise that I also want my grandchildren to know my story, but not just the war part.

Above all, I think people should know these things because maybe that will help to stem the development of hatred among people. Sure, you can have your likes and dislikes. You can prefer somebody with short or long hair or with blond or dark hair, blue or dark eyes, but not to the extent that you are willing to kill somebody because they are not of your own persuasion.

Unfortunately, the world doesn't work like that at all. People are still killing each other in many different parts of the globe. And for what? What are they going to gain by it? Blood? What is the matter with us? I'm constantly turning off the radio and television because I seem to hear so much of war, killing and the cheapness of human life.

I want to tell my grandchildren that they should be decent human beings, that they should have respect for other people, no matter what colour, what nationality. They should respect people for who they are.

Appendixes

Letter from Tamara

Dear Mum,

We've been asked to write about our childhoods, after Dad's death.

I remember Dad as a quiet, serious person.

[Naomi: I think he had a good sense of humour but he'd just laugh discreetly to himself about a 'private' joke.]

He was exceptionally kind to Mum's mother, our Baba Mina. Sometimes she'd come with us on family holidays. They had a wonderful bond. Now you, Mum, come on holidays with our families.

Dad was terribly ill for well over a year before he died. You cared for him around the clock, Mum. You rarely left his side. I still have a note from you saying, 'The food is in the fridge. I'll be back soon from the hospital. Look after yourselves.' Dad was in a wheelchair and on oxygen for about six months, then he slipped into a coma and two days later he died, on my 15th birthday. I was given a gold heart. Even though he was so ill, he was so thoughtful. For Naomi and Yvette's birthday, which was three days later, he saw to it that they received gold watches.

I'll never forget being at Dad's burial. At Jewish burials it's considered an honour to put soil on top of the grave. The sound of that soil dropping on Dad's coffin remains with me. 'Plonk, plonk, plonk.' It took me many years before I felt I could even attend a funeral after that.

[Yvette: For years I never went to funerals.

Naomi: None of us will ever go willingly to a grave site and be exposed to that sound again.]

Losing Dad was painful, but you sort of block it all out. The three of us had to develop our own survival mechanisms. We became extremely independent and self-reliant, which is a good thing. None of us is 'Woe is me; I'm a poor little thing.' I tend to shy away from people like that. I don't know if that's how we were or whether we became that way, but I find it a plus. Finding that strength, those positive aspects was how we coped with our loss, and by keeping an extremely close bond with each other.

My memories were that you were a tough parent, Mum, very strict.

You seemed to be on good terms with all my friends. They used to love coming around to our home just to talk to you, and to confide in you, too. And that fondness continues. It might be 33 years since I've seen someone, and they'll quickly ask, 'How's your Mum? Is she still living in that big house?'

[Naomi: What about our schoolfriend? She could never tell whether Mum was joking or not. She came round wearing green nail polish one day so Mum took her into the garden and said she had a job for her, that she needed someone with green fingers. Poor girl, she was in tears. We reckoned Mum should have a light over her head – green for joking; red for serious.]

In 1973 I left for a year on an Israeli kibbutz. You thought it would be a good thing for me to have a little distance from the family. I'd become a little too possessive, too

verbose; I needed to have more independence. The family had become such a huge part of my existence and I needed to find myself.

[Yvette: Tamara, you begged Mum to let you go when you found out that the guy you were so crazy about was going over there as a leader!]

I had developed a tremendously strong sense of family responsibility. Yvette and Naomi were such handfuls. The things they got up to! It was good for me to get away and to let it all go. And I had a really great time in Israel.

I've been married for over 25 years and have three children of my own. I look back and can truly appreciate what you've taught us. You have a brilliant sense of humour, Mum, and you're a high-achiever – always encouraging us to have a go at things. You have a great respect for intelligence – you don't suffer fools, but you also give people the benefit of the doubt when you first meet them. I see you as an extremely compassionate person, especially towards those who are down and out. You have a great love for animals as well.

In terms of values, you've impressed upon us the importance of family and stressed that the three of us should always look after each other, no matter what.

[Naomi: Yes. Regardless of what arguments we had, if ever anyone got between the four of us, watch out.]

You've taught us to aim high and not to be afraid of trying or even of falling flat on our faces. 'You'll get over it,' you've consistently said. 'That's not something you have to dwell on.' And we've always had a lot of fun, Mum; you've given us that sense of the enjoyment of life.

[Yvette: And generosity. Mum's always been generous in spirit.]

And another thing I've learnt from you, Mum, is to allow people just one opportunity to let you down. It's bad to get kicked once, but not to have realised what that person's really like and to let yourself be kicked a second time, is to be a fool. Be open, be generous, but keep your eyes open, you have always said.

Love, Tamara

Letter from Naomi

Dear Mum,

I am proud to stand next to you and say, 'This is my Mum – she brought us girls up on her own.'

As part of contributing to this book, I have tried to recall events about our childhood and find it is divided into 'life with Dad' and 'life after Dad'. I don't remember too many specific incidents about just Dad and me – I have more memories about us as a family. One thing I fondly remember is kicking a soccer ball with Dad in front of the house. He loved his soccer and his 'to-himself' jokes.

Dad had a quiet sense of dignity about him – to me he was almost a gentle giant. He would laugh to himself, and when we asked what it was about he shrugged and said, 'It's just a little joke that you would not find funny as I.'

Your humour has always been practical and immediate. It sustained us through many a difficult time.

Dad and you never argued. There was never any dissension in the house. If you got worked up, it was, 'Henia, darling, not in front of the children.' And off the two of you would go to the bedroom to discuss whatever the issue was. You and Dad were protective of us three girls.

When Dad passed away, we knew our lives had changed dramatically and we each took up new roles to ensure all the chores were done. It was a matter of survival – we just had to get on with things and we were quickly aware that the family was now just the four of us. I think this was the genesis of the strong Shaw women. At least, strong on the outside. I think we are really a family of meringues – crusty on the outside and soft inside.

In looking back at those years, Mum, you ensured our friendships did not suffer from our circumstances. Despite us sitting 'Shiva for the whole year' for Dad, our house was like a drop-in centre for all our friends. But your social life was non-existent. When Dad died, the family invitations slowed right down – probably because you were such a good-looking woman, you would have posed a threat to other wives. Your world changed; you went from having a pretty active social life to there being only about five families who included us in their gatherings. Those families remain important to us and are active in our lives today.

You always impressed upon us the importance of faith and family. Your concerns for my welfare even extended to trying to organise dates for me. The number of times I answered the door or phone to discover some fellow to whom you had given my details – unbeknownst to me – on the assumption a date with me would follow. You and I now laugh about it – those poor fellows had no hope. Now I'm happily married, we both look at my husband, Jeff, and remark how he also has many of the wonderful traits that you admired in Dad. And Dad was a hard act to follow.

We three girls have all married husbands who're very accepting of our relationships with you, the demands you make of us and the bonds we have with one another.

We all have a wicked sense of humour – which we got from you – and the ability to get on with our lives despite whatever happens.

There is still confusion about who you are referring to when you talk about 'Noemi' – to which I respond. You named me Naomi but never got the hang of the pronunciation. When Tamara's kids were young, you once said something about my imminent arrival that sounded to them like, 'No Emi is coming,' – that there would be no Emi. They got upset and cried and kept repeating, 'Yes, Emi.' So today I am called Emi. As always, I come – when summoned – no matter what you call me.

One thing we sisters agree on is that you are a peril on the road. Every time I see Michael M., who aided in your learning to drive, I tell him I hold him personally responsible. Ditto for Amos F. Remember the time you were driving Yvette and me to the airport and we were late? A police officer drove alongside and motioned for you to pull over to the side of the road because you were speeding. You didn't slow down – just yelled that you were late for our plane and that he should get you on the way back from the airport. He was so shocked with that retort that he just let you continue driving on.

Or the time you drove Marty home after picking up airline tickets from him. Today he still tells the story of how he survived your driving expertise. Or the poor car salesman? He came to our house to sell you a new car and left in the back of a taxi – no keys, no car. He decided you should have it for nothing, as you were such a nice lady. Only it was my fault that time. You asked me to offer him a cold drink. I did as I was told – except it was a full glass of neat scotch. I did not know about pouring drinks. By the time his glass was empty, he was so drunk that he gave you the car.

Yvette completes the story – the guy was so smashed, he lay down on the sofa, not feeling too well. Mum took the keys and put them on the table, she put a note in his shirt pocket saying where he had left them, then she called him a cab. Next day, a big bunch of flowers arrives from Pearsons – with an apology and a retraction. Sorry, you can't have the car for nothing.

You seem to have a few incidents with cars and with police officers, too! The list should include telegraph poles, driveways, garages and shopping centres. It's not every mother that is on first name terms with the tow truck drivers.

As Tamara so rightly says, there have been many stories over the years. Thankfully, they've mainly revolved around your chutzpah. While the stories about your Holocaust survival have been told in pieces over time, it has always been acknowledged that those events shaped your life. Yet you never allowed it to affect our lives – we grew up knowing something had happened and that every so often it would drag you down. But you didn't allow it to dominate our lives.

Even recently, you tried to make those experiences work positively for you. Remember when we went to get you a mobile phone and the lady told you that you required a PIN number? 'It has to be something you're not going to forget or lose,' she explained. We exchanged glances. You held your arm out and pointed to where your number is tattooed. 'Okay,' you said. 'Here's my PIN number. I've waited 50 years to find a use for it.' Practical as ever!

It is through your determination that we have strong family values and all have a good education. Through all the years, there were two things you insisted on – that we be together every Friday night to observe the *Shabbat*, and that we gain an education. Despite all your losses, your grief over Dad, you never gave up your faith. It was your experiences that heightened your resolve that we would grow up to be proud, educated, independent and capable women. My degree may be in Organisational Behaviour, but it was from you I learnt about business and how to organise one and all.

We admire, love and respect you, Mum. You've taught us to face life with courage, strength and resilience. Your positive approach has certainly rubbed off on us all. You've taught us to have the capacity for compassion and shown us that laughter is vital for survival. And you were always there for us through thick and thin.

On a shop window I saw this saying:

What happens to you does not matter; what you become through those experiences is all that is significant. This is the true meaning of life.

Those words sum up how I see life, from your teachings. You are an exceptional teacher of life and how to live life fully in the here and now. Thank you.

PS Cooking lessons would not have harmed any of us, either.

Love, 'Noemi'

Letter from Yvette

Dear Henia,

Dad's death has had the greatest impact of anything on our lives, but I don't recall ever asking out loud 'Why?' about losing him. The way I see it, we could easily have turned out to be three little princesses, unaware of life's hardships, with a good education, living in a lovely home and all of that. The fact that we have all become strong and community-minded individuals was a positive outcome.

As soon as Dad had to stop work, there was no way we were going to be able to afford any kind of private education. Instead we had to pull together to get through. We found different ways. Tamara assumed the dominant role in the family. She became a parent figure. We all did our bit. We managed to laugh at ourselves, too. It has always been the way in our family, hasn't it? Dad's death left us with strength. That's a positive.

There was always plenty going on at our house. People were always calling in. Our friends would drop by often to talk with you, Mum.

One thing I'll never forget is the speech you made at my son Adam's Bar Mitzvah.

'Adam,' you said. 'You are my first-born grandchild, and my first grandson!' Then you continued:

As clever, as intelligent as you are, you will not remember how we celebrated your arrival to this world. To me it meant a celebration of life! A celebration and rejoicing at the continuity of the Jewish people.

It is probably difficult for you to appreciate how I felt. Because my generation appeared to be doomed. That was how we European Jews felt then.

Adam, seeing you standing in front of the Torah, I went back in time thinking, 'Where was I at your age?' The war had just begun and I was heading for the camp. No, it was not a holiday camp. From there it was a long and hard road to Sydney.

You could have heard a pin drop in that room. Then, with your audience in the palm of your hand – as is always the case when you give a speech – you moved on to talk of life in Sydney, and to tell funny stories about Lenny and me. You are amazing.

Have you forgiven me for moving down to Melbourne yet, Henia? You packed me a tea chest full of all your old stuff – an iron that didn't work, tea towels with holes in them – and you were so sure I'd be back from there in a week. 'Don't bring that rubbish back with you,' you said.

I truly appreciate how much time my sisters dedicate to your care. You see, Mum, your planning has worked out well. You've always been a great one for having a contingency plan. The number of times you double up – ring both daughters in Sydney to independently bring the same items of groceries so that there's a fall-back in case one lot doesn't arrive. Having twins was your ultimate contingency plan. Not only did you

get a bargain – two for the price of one – if one didn't work out, there was another one there.

Love, Yvette

Note about my grandparents

Sara Blima, Joseph Pleisner – maternal grandparents

Szymon and Salomea Scherment – paternal grandparents

Timeline

14 July 1925	birth of Henryka. Home: 1 Wielicka Street, Podgorze, Krakow
late 1940/early 1941	entered ghetto
January 1943	transported to Plaszow
Erev Purim, 1944	death of father
October 1944	arrival at Auschwitz Number: A216538
17 January 1945	transportation to Bergen-Belsen
January/February 1945	transferred to Venusberg
February/March 1945	walked to Mauthausen
9 May 1945	liberation by Americans
July 1945	looked for sister in Budapest
1946	worked as a nurse at Enns displaced Person's Camp, Austria
late 1947–51	worked as a nurse in England, first in Preston, then in London
16 November 1953	arrived in Sydney and lived with mother at 175 Glenayr Ave, Bondi
1953	started working at The Scottish Hospital, Paddington
April 1954	met Rudy
August 1954	married Rudy; lived at 103 Carrington Rd, Randwick
25 March 1955	birth of Tamara
28 March 1957	birth of Naomi and Yvette
1965	bought 36 Boronia Rd, Bellevue Hill
25 March 1970	death of Rudy
3 August 1973	death of Mina Goldman (mother)
1973	Tamara spent year in Israel
7 January 1979	Tamara marries Bernard Pollak. (Three children, Avi, Marisa and Ellen.)
16 November 1980	Yvette marries Lennie Bogatin. (Two children, Adam and Carly.)
1 March 1992	Naomi marries Jeff Silberbach. (Two children, Ryan and Mikaela.)

Glossary

Bar mitzvah	A boy's coming of age at 13, being called to the Torah and accepting the religious obligations of a Jewish man
Bat mitzvah	A girl's coming of age at 12
Beracha	Blessing
Beshert	Predestined
Ghetto	A segregated area of a city reserved for an ethnic minority
Israel	Since 1948, the Jewish national homeland (previously known as Palestine)
Jewish	A multi-dimensional concept of identity. Some view their Jewishness as essentially religious, abiding by 'halacha' or Jewish law. Others view themselves as socio-culturally Jewish by virtue of a shared history and culture. Others see themselves as an ethnic minority, persecuted over millenia, with a mission to ensure their survival by consolidation and protecting the State of Israel as an historic home and sanctuary for the Jewish people.
Kaddish	Mourner's Prayer
Kiddush	The sanctification of wine which precedes Shabbat and festival meals
Kosher	Conforming to Jewish religious dietary laws
Orthodox	Strictly observant of Jewish religious laws and customs
Pesach	Passover – a major Jewish festival which commemorates the exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom
Rosh Chodesh	The beginning of the new month of the Jewish (lunar) calendar
Shoah	Holocaust – the German Nazi genocidal attempt to annihilate European Jewry. Six million Jews perished.
SS	The Gestapo–Nazi secret service charged particularly with implementing the holocaust
Yahrzeit	Memorial anniversary of the death of a loved one

